Ramsey Campbell: The Old School

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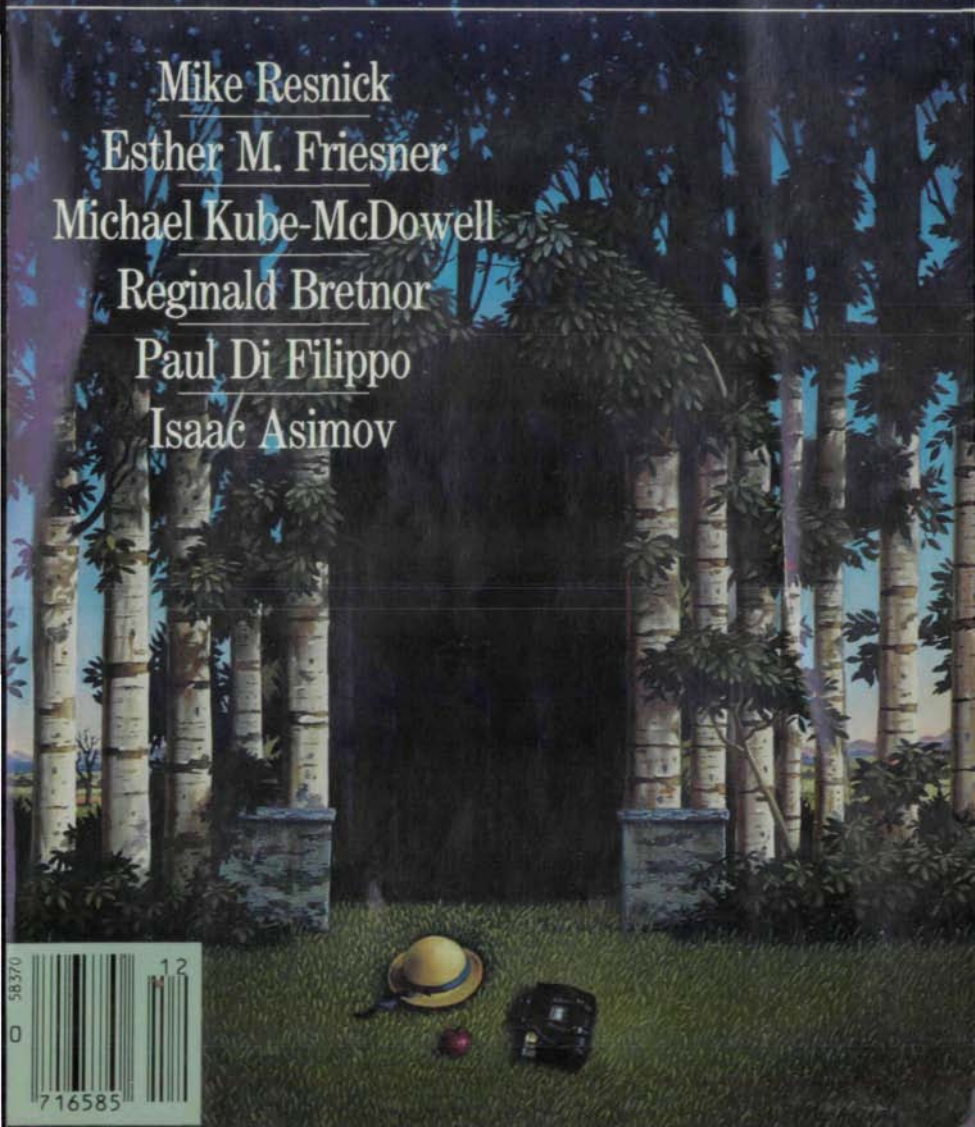

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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England's Ramsey Campbell is one of our premier writers of dark fantasy; he is a winner of several World Fantasy Awards and British Fantasy awards. His most recent books include a novel, ANCIENT IMAGES (Scribners), and a collection of thirty of his best stories titled DARK FEASTS.

The Old School

By Ramsey Campbell

THE HOUSE WAS locked. Dean strolled around the outside for a quarter of an hour, gazing through the tall windows at displays of roped-off rooms, and then he climbed the wide steps to the balcony. A lawn broader than his eyesight offered shrubberies and formal gardens and tree-lined walks. At the edge of the lawn, almost half a mile away, woods blotted out every vestige of the farther world.

He'd known for years that the house was less than an hour's drive from home. Even better, it was only half an hour from the new town and the school. He could drive here after teaching, when he needed to relax and be taken out of himself. He was gazing at a distant shrubbery, where either mossy statues were hidden in the foliage or the topiary itself was shaped into faces, when the August sun found a gap in the flock of fat white clouds. Sunlight wakened all the drops of rain that still lingered from the afternoon, seeds of rainbows everywhere he looked, and the sight washed away his thoughts.

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As he leaned on the parapet, no longer aware of the cold stone through the leather that patched the elbows of his jacket, he heard a sound he would have hoped to have left behind in the new town. Someone was kicking a tin can. He sighed and straightened up, automatically brushing his hair back over as much of his scalp as it would cover these days. Perhaps the tinny footballer was a gardener, and would desist when he saw the place had a visitor.

Dean heard a more determined kick, and the can landed deep in a bush. Three children appeared around the side of the house: two boys, and a girl who wore high heels and lipstick so crimson Dean could see it even at that distance. The boy with a black eye poked at the bush with a stick while the other boy, whose pate looked dusty with stubble, danced hyperactively around him. Branches snapped, the can sprang into the air, and the boys jostled after it toward the steps.

The game ended when the hyperactive boy leaped on the can and trod it flat. His friend made a gesture of generalized menace with the stick and chopped twigs off bushes as he went back to demand a share of the girl's cigarette. The children were about eleven years old, Dean saw. He ought to interfere, though he felt as if there were nowhere his job would leave him alone this side of the grave. When he saw the children whisper and glance warily about, not noticing him, before converging on the nearest window, he went down the steps.

The children veered away at once. The girl blinked over her shoulder at him and nudged her companions, who glanced back, whistling tunelessly. The boy with the stick turned first, raising his shoulders like a boxer, and Dean saw that the bruise around his right eye was a birthmark. "Hello, sir," the boy said like a challenge.

They were from the school where Dean taught. He'd seen the boy in the junior school yard, thumping children for calling him Spot the Dog. Surely Dean needn't play this scene like a schoolmaster. "Enjoying your holidays?" he said in his best end-of-term voice.

They stared at him as if he'd made an insulting feeble joke. "They're all right," the girl mumbled, treading on her cigarette.

"So long as you don't enjoy them at other people's expense. Spoiling them for others might mean you'll spoil them for yourselves."

The hyperactive boy jiggled his head as if to a beat only he could hear; the boy with the black eye swung his stick like a rod divining violence;

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the girl dug her hands into the pockets of her short, faded secondhand dress and stared morosely at her budding breasts. "So have you something to do?" Dean said.

"Like what?" said the boy with the stick.

"Surely you know a few games."

"We've nothing to play with," the girl complained.

"Can't you play with yourselves?" Dean said, and had to laugh at his choice of words. At least that prompted the children to laugh out loud, too. "If I were you," he said, "I'd be using this place to play hide-and-seek."

"Why don't you, then?"

"He won't play with us," the boy with the birthmark said with what sounded like bitterness.

If he were in Dean's class, Dean wouldn't treat him with undue sympathy, would insist he join in activities like everyone else. "Of course I'll play if you want me to," Dean blurted, and added when they smirked incredulously: "I'm off school, too, you know."

"Suppose so," the girl said as if she were humoring him. "You know how to play Blocko, don't you?"

"Remind me."

"Whoever's It has to count fifty and then try and find us, and run back here and shout, 'Blocko Tina one two three' if they've seen me, or Burt if it's him, or Jacko if it's him. Watch out with that stick, Jacko, or you'll hit someone."

She had already been addressing the teacher in the same maternal tone. She began to point at each of them in turn as she chanted:

Girls and boys come out to play,
The moon does shine as bright as day.
Eeny meeny miney mo,
Bone in the wind and it points at you.

"It's sir," Burt shouted, eager to be running. Jacko struck his own thigh several times with the stick while Tina removed her shoes so as to be quicker. Dean covered his eyes and, turning to the steps, began to count. "You have to count so we can hear you," Tina told him.

"One!" Dean pronounced in a voice capable of traveling the length of both school yards. "Two! Three! . . ." He heard the children scatter, and

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then only his voice. ". . . Forty-nine! Fifty! here I come!" he shouted, and swung around to find a couple in their sixties staring warily at him from beside a corner of the house. "I beg your pardon?" the woman said in a voice that refused to admit where she came from.

"Blocko," Dean explained with a conspiratorial grimace.

The man's face grew alarmingly like empurpled blancmange, and he pointed at Dean with his knuckly cane. "What did you say to my wife?"

"Blocko. The children's game, you know. You'll see the children any minute."

The woman grabbed her husband's arm. "What's that about children? Is he raving?"

"Everything's under control, madam. I'm a teacher."

"He says he's their teacher," the man communicated even more loudly.

"Not *their* teacher," Dean said, and gave up. He crept toward the shubberies while the couple watched him suspiciously. They distracted him, and so did noticing that there weren't any statues or anything like faces where he thought he'd seen some. He was out of sight of the steps when Tina announced her return there and the boys joined her, shouting.

The suspicious couple had stayed near the steps. As Dean jogged back, the woman announced, "He said he wasn't their teacher."

"Then he's up to no good."

Tina brandished her shoes at him. "You leave him alone. He's from our school."

Burt commenced swinging his stick in defense of her or of Dean, and the teacher said hastily, "Time for another game. Off you all go."

This game wasn't too successful. When he pounced on a movement that he glimpsed beyond a shrubbery, he came face-to-face with the elderly couple, though he'd thought he had heard them retreating around one corner of the house. They glared at him as if he'd invaded their bedroom, and he could only jog away as if he hadn't noticed them, trying not to swing his arms too vigorously, and yet concerned that he might appear sloppy otherwise, feeling as if he were trapped into miming enjoyment while pretending that he had no audience. When he turned tail and ran back to the steps, they followed him, though he was running because he'd seen Tina lurch into view beyond a hedge behind them. "Blocko Tina one two three," he declared.

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Tina put on her shoes and stamped. "That wasn't fair. Burt or Jacko scared me, whispering behind me."

The boys appeared around opposite corners of the house, and Dean counted them out. "It couldn't have been the boys, Tina. They were nowhere near you."

"Thank God something frightens her," the woman told nobody in particular. "Children respect nothing these days."

"We aren't frightened of *you*," Burt said, punching the air.

"You wouldn't dare say that to anyone if you were from the boarding school," the man rumbled, jabbing his cane in the direction of the woods. "That's what teaching should be. You'd be terrified to open your mouth until you were told."

"You're right, Tina: it isn't fair. I'll be It again," Dean said. He began counting very slowly, staring at the couple until they moved away. As the children ran off between the shrubberies, arguing in low voices about something, he closed his eyes.

Now that he'd started counting so slowly, he found that he couldn't speed up. In the pauses between numbers, he heard the wind in the leaves, the footsteps of the couple marching regally away along the gravel drive, stealthy movements that must be the children tiptoeing around him at some distance, though once he thought he heard a whisper unexpectedly close to him. "Fifty!" he shouted at last, and looked.

The lawn was deserted. He'd already deduced from the movements he'd heard that the children had crept around the house. He was cupping each ear in turn toward the ends of the facade, when he caught sight of a child among the trees at the edge of the lawn.

It was a boy — he wasn't sure which one. Dean might have called out, but that wouldn't be fair until he could say the name. In any case, the child wouldn't be able to reach the steps before Dean. He paced toward the trees, keeping his gaze on the boy's face.

At first he thought the child was staying still and hoping that Dean hadn't seen him, and then he realized that the small face was withdrawing through the tall undergrowth at exactly the speed of Dean's approach. The sight made Dean's eyes feel shaky, the child's face seeming to appear and vanish as the shadows of foliage camouflaged it, made it shift and turned it greener. He sprinted toward the woods so as to be able to put a name to it, and at once he couldn't see it at all. Presumably, the other children

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were also in the woods, or they would have been able to saunter to the steps by now. He peered between the trees as he ran to the edge of the lawn.

He could see no obvious path into the woods. Here and there the undergrowth had been trampled, but not for any great distance. Dean headed straight for the place where he had last seen the boy, who must have reached it by another route, since the undergrowth between it and the lawn was undisturbed. Stepping over ferns and spiky grass, raindrops speckling his trousers and darkening his shoes, Dean stole into the woods. As soon as he was out of the direct sunlight, he saw a child's face blurred by shadows, watching him from the undergrowth between the trees ahead.

The sound of children's voices made him glance toward the house. Three children were walking away along the drive: Tina and the two boys. If they'd tired of the game, whom was Dean tracking? He swung round, and glimpsed the boy's face in the instant before it fled, leaving a patch of ferns and grass swaying. The boy was several years younger than Tina and her friends. The idea of such a young child roaming the woods, especially so close to nightfall, dismayed Dean. "Hold on," he called. "I wasn't chasing you. Don't run away."

The trees had begun to vibrate with his scrutiny, when he saw the face again, five or six trees farther off. He held up one hand and was opening his mouth, when the face was swallowed by shadows again and reappeared deeper into the woods. "Don't be frightened," Dean shouted. "I'm a teacher."

The child's face quivered and disappeared. The movement was so violent that it must have been mostly of the low foliage through which the child had been watching. Dean was wondering if he should pretend indifference — if that would coax the boy into the open — when he realized that the child had fled because he'd identified himself as a teacher. He had to assume that the boy was from the boarding school beyond the woods.

Sometimes Dean found it necessary to play the ogre with his classes, but he didn't enjoy it much. The idea of relishing children's fears, as the elderly couple had, disgusted him.. When he managed to locate the boy's face again, in the midst of a cluster of leaves, he went forward. He wanted to see the child safe, but also to judge whether the school was as terrible as the couple would like to believe, though he didn't know what he would do if he found that it was.

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The woods proved to be even more extensive than they had appeared from the balcony. For nearly half an hour, he must have walked in as straight a line as the trees and patches of marshy ground would allow. Before long he saw that there was more than one child. As soon as he glimpsed any of the faces in the foliage or undergrowth, they retreated into the leafy shadows. They were letting him see them, he realized: they were continuing the game he'd started with Tina and the boys. He wished he could enjoy it more. Once, when he was sick in bed with a childhood fever, he'd seen the wallpaper piled high with faces like skulls in a catacomb, and since then the kind of picture puzzle where you had to discover faces hidden in foliage had made him feel feverish, too; but now he was nervous also because the boys — five or six of them, he thought there were — seemed to be fleeing from him as much as playing.

By the time he came close enough to the far edge of the woods to be able to distinguish a building through the trees, he was having to pick his way over roots. In the growing dimness the faces of the children were barely visible, through a bush at the edge of the woods. He wasn't even sure that he was seeing them, for when a breeze rustled through the foliage, the greenish faces appeared to separate into fragments that recombined grotesquely. Increasingly nervous, he stumbled out of the woods.

The sight of the school made him catch his breath. For a moment he thought that the long Victorian building, all gloomy red brick and high, pinched windows, looked decaying only because the twilight was filling the windows with darkness, and then he saw that it was derelict. The windows were empty of glass, the grounds rubbly and overgrown; the school must have been abandoned years ago. All the same, he knew instinctively that it had been almost as grim and daunting when it was in use.

A movement at one of the windows overlooking the woods drew his attention. A face was watching him from inside the school — the face of the boy he had followed into the woods. "Stay right where you are, son," Dean shouted. "Don't run off in there; it could be dangerous."

He gritted his teeth as the face vanished. The boy must have stepped back into the dimness. In the poor light the face had seemed to collapse into itself. "What's the matter with you?" Dean said through his teeth, and ran toward the school, across lumps of stone that had been a harsh school yard.

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The entrance door nearest to the woods was ajar. Presumably, that was how the boy, or however many of them were inside, had got in, since the windows were too high for even Dean to reach. He squeezed past the door, which appeared to be wedged open, and halted in the corridor.

He was standing still in order to listen for movements that would help him locate the children, but more than that had halted him. Something was wrong with this place, with the long, bleak stone-floored corridor that led past a series of classroom doors, their upper panels gaping. He hadn't time to stand there; he had to take the children somewhere safer before night fell. He strode along the corridor, pushing the doors open.

He could see nothing of significance in any of the rooms. In the corner of one, a legless desk crouched, its distorted lid grinning beneath the single blotchy socket on the inkwell; in another classroom a few chalk marks glimmered on a blackboard like bones hovering in darkness. Despite the emptiness, something was waiting for him beyond the doors, accumulating like the twilight as he went from room to room, as he stared at the desertion where ranks of desks trapping children had stood, no doubt silent as the emptiness was now except for a single voice and a timid response: it was fear.

It wasn't his, he told himself, except insofar as the place reminded him of the worst of his own school days. How afraid must the children have been for their fear to have lingered almost palpably in the air? They wouldn't have been able to see the outside world from their desks, and the outside world wouldn't have been able to see in — not that it would have bothered to look. The children must have felt they were in prison without visitors, at the absolute mercy of the staff.

Dean tried to think he was exaggerating, but that would mean some of the fear was his. Certainly the rooms were beginning to make him nervous, because he'd realized what was wrong with them: they were too empty, and so was the corridor. Where were the dust and cobwebs and dead leaves that the building should have accumulated? He was also wondering how the child had managed to look out at him from such a high window when there was nothing to stand on in the classrooms; the broken desk wouldn't have served. He could only think the boy had balanced on someone else's shoulders.

He'd peered into at least a dozen rooms, which seemed more and more to him like huge, pitiless cells, when he came to the assembly hall that

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divided the corridor from its twin. The hall would have held several hundred children, and he felt as if it had retained their fear, imprisoned or awakened by the growing dark. He mustn't let the place or his imagination get to him. He was heading for the opposite corridor, when he noticed a door under the stage at the far end of the hall.

It was half-open. In the dark beyond it, he thought he saw the glint of an eye, watching him. He crossed the hall quickly, his footsteps echoing through the school as though to demonstrate the extent of the darkness. Fumbling a book of matches out of his pocket, he ducked under the stage. His fingertip counted the matches: one, two, three, only four. He tore one out and struck it, and the gleam leaped at him.

He hadn't seen an eye after all, but the smashed glass on a school photograph. Photographs were stacked as high as the underside of the stage, and a few leaned against the stack. Apart from the photographs, the space was as bare as the rest of the school so far. The picture in front of him was older than the wars, he saw from the date on the frame. Tiny faces brown with age stared at him through the broken glass as the match burned down, and just as it singed his fingers, he thought he recognized some of the faces. He shook out the match and struck another, and shuffled forward on his knees to pull the photograph toward him. Among the unsmiling teenagers in the tallest rank of schoolboys lined up in front of the building, there were older versions of the faces of all the boys he'd followed through the woods.

The boys in the photograph must have grown up to be their grandparents, he thought, but what possessed the parents to let their children play here so late? He let go of the photograph, intending to back out from under the stage. The photograph fell flat, taking several with it and revealing the one closest to the stack. Pressed beneath the glass of that photograph were faces more familiar than those he'd just seen.

Dean hobbled forward, bruising his knees, holding the match high, hoping to be proved wrong — but there was no mistake. At the front of the photograph, where the youngest boys sat cross-legged, were all the children whose faces he'd seen in the woods. He lowered the match shakily to the frame, and read the date. The photograph was ten years older than the other he'd examined. The match went out, burying him in darkness.

The photograph was too old for the boys to be still alive, let alone looking like children. His mind flinched from that and from an even more

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dismaying thought: Why would they have come back here, when there could have been nowhere they were more afraid of? He was staring into the dark, no longer searching but trying to hide, when he heard movement behind him.

He scrambled round on all fours, afraid to see, more afraid not to. The fear around him was almost suffocating, and he felt as if it had changed the texture of the floor beneath him. Just beyond the doorway under the stage, dim shapes that looked thin and malformed were crowding, blocking his way. Though his hands were trembling so badly that he almost dropped the matchbook, he managed to light the third match.

The figures — far more numerous than in the woods — were mostly faces and spidery limbs. The nearest face was the one he'd first seen. This close, he was able to see that it and its companions had no eyes to speak of, though they appeared to have done their best not to look incomplete. The substance of the faces and of their token bodies was shifting, not only because the match was quivering. All at once the wind that he could hear blundering about the school flung the figures at him.

As Dean shrank back, they collapsed like discarded puppets. The nearest face fell inward, as it had when he'd seen it at the window, and the materials of which the figures had been composed fluttered across the boards at him: dust, dead leaves and other vegetation, cobwebs loaded with husks of insects. The wind that was driving all this blew out the match, and he was crouching in the dark, when he heard the wind slam the entrance door with a click of the lock that resounded through the school.

Dean pressed his hands and his scalp against the underside of the stage, as if that could give him strength or at least stop his shivering, but the wood felt softened by fear. Only his brain seemed capable of action, his thoughts chattering desperately as though an explanation could somehow end what was happening. Suppose, he thought, the experience of finding yourself suddenly dead and bodiless was so terrifying that you would use anything you could grasp to persuade yourself that you still had substance, however temporarily? Suppose finding yourself dead was so reminiscent of the greatest terror of your life that you were snatched back to it? Suppose you felt so vulnerable that your mind could only take refuge in the familiarity of remembered terror and imprison you there? None of these ideas helped him deal with the movements he could just see be-

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tween him and the doorway, shapes wavering up from the floor, remaking themselves. He was struggling not to retreat farther under the stage, away from any possibility of escape, when he heard the remains of a voice, hardly a whisper, more like a thought that wasn't his. "He's a teacher," it said.

The shapes leaned toward him, jerry-built heads wavering on rickety necks. "Not like the teachers who were here," Dean pleaded in a voice whose smallness shocked him. "I wouldn't have treated you like that."

There was a rustle of dead things as they crowded around him. "Chase us," said part of the rustling.

They wanted to be frightened, Dean thought in dismay: it was all they knew now. He needn't be frightened, his mind babbled; they were nothing but cobwebs and litter. He wouldn't play; they couldn't make him play. He brandished the unlit match at them as if the threat would keep them off. Perhaps when they saw he wasn't playing, they would leave him alone, give him the chance to escape without having to touch them; and if not, he had only to stay still. "I won't ever come back here," he was muttering over and over, like a promise to them or to himself. "I mustn't come back here." He need only stay still until he could see his way out, until dawn.

At first he managed not to run, even when they started touching him to make him chase them. Eventually the touch of spindly, disintegrating fingers proved unbearable. He crawled sobbing from under the stage and began to run back and forth through the lightless building, up and down the corridors, in and out of the rooms, leaping at the inaccessible windows, turning tail whenever he ran into something hiding in the dark. Soon he didn't know if he was giggling with fear or they were, nor whether he was chasing or being chased. He knew only that he was willing to play. Indeed, it seemed he might never stop.

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Chroma (The Art of Alex Schomburg), by Jon Gustafson, Father Tree Press (1986) (O.P.)

Available signed by Schomburg and Gustafson, numbered, boxed, at $35, and in large-format paperback at $12.95, plus shipping, from: Jon Gustafson, 621 E. "F" Street, Moscow, ID 83843

ANOTHER WORLD Science Fiction convention has come and gone without an Artist Guest of Honor, and I would like to celebrate Alex Schomburg, as well as what Alex Schomburg means to us.

Born in 1905 in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, one of a number of artistically talented children of a German civil engineer and his Latin wife, Alex Schomburg at one time or another has done cover paintings for nearly all the important SF magazines — certainly including this one — and for a vast number of the evanescent ones, as well. He has done black-and-white interior illustrations for innumerable SF stories, and — a distinction I don't believe anyone else has pointed out — has supplied so many "spot" drawings that have decorated the pages of many magazines that he is undoubtedly the all-time premier practitioner of this specialized art. "Spots" are the drawings of space ships, futuristic architecture, astronomical scenes and alien landscapes that fill what would be white space at the ends of stories. They are what enables a magazine to lay out its pages so that everything appears to fit just so. If you will leaf through almost all the issues of *Thrilling Wonder Stories, Startling Stories, Captain Future, Fantastic Universe, Satellite Science Fiction,* and I frankly don't know how many other Sf magazines, you will see that this one artist is primarily responsible for the familiar interior "look" of all those treasured publications, whether or not he was also illustrating specific stories in a given issue.

He is the man who designed the logotype — the style in which the title is lettered — for *Startling.* And,

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it is only by a slight diversion of Fate that old-time SF buffs do not gaze back nostalgically at all those evocative 1920s Schomburg covers for *Amazing Stories* and *Air Wonder Stories*. Frank R. Paul, in his 30s and thus with a longer track record than the 21-year-old Schomburg's, won the assignment from magazine-SF pioneer Hugo Gernsback. Nevertheless, Schomburg was doing interior illustrations for Gernsback's popular-science magazines back then, and he was Gernsback's last main illustrator, for *Science Fiction +*, the magazine Gernsback tried to float in the 1950s. I believe Schomburg's last *F&SF* cover was the hypnotically detailed April, 1980, space-station painting, but I leave it to Ed Ferman to supply the footnote here.*

Put it another way: Alex Schomburg's career to date spans the entire lifetime of newsstand SF; he is the only living human being who has been in SF longer than Jack Williamson.

Put it another way: Alex Schomburg is the only high-volume comicbook cover artist who has also been a major SF magazine artist.†

Put it another way: Alex Schomburg could portray Bucky, Toro, The Human Torch, Sub-Mariner, Captain America and Doc Strange — and a veritable army of other comicbook superheroes — in the pointedly distorted perspectives and impossible crowd scenes that he personally made THE way to do comicbook covers during what is now called the Golden Age of Comics, and

(more) he could paint magazine covers that matched the tone and feel of Paul, Brown, Wesso, Bonestell and DiFate, and

(more) in the 1950s he then had his own style of sharply composed, stunningly executed spaceships and futuristic scenes on the covers of more SF magazines in any given month than any other artist, and thus determined the exterior "look" of magazine SF for a period of about five years, and

(more) — as Jon Gustafson's *Chroma* proves with beautiful color reproductions, he was doing paintings at home that were indistinguishable from work done in the mode of Thomas Hart Benton, of Norman Rockwell and, in yet another casual demonstration of versatility, stunningly effective French Impressionism.

Some of us thought we know and cherish Alex Schomburg's work. However well we might have known what we knew, we knew only part.

* *He did one later cover, a Christmas cover for the January 1981 issue.*

† *Kelly Freas and Frank Frazetta will yield on this point, I rather think.*

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* * *

My occasion for discovering this is a book which, while not exactly lost, is slipping away. Beautifully produced by Richard Pini for his Father Tree Press, full of very high-quality color reproduction, *Chroma* did not sell well and has been remaindered. Jon Gustafson bought up a significant portion — if not, indeed, all — of the unsold stock, and there it is; an artist's life.

I don't see how Schomburg could have had a better biographer: I think there are artists out there who, on reading this volume, should be wishing mightily that Gustafson take a similar interest in them.

There are 108 8½ x 11" pages in the book, 89 color reproductions plus a number of line drawings and halftones, photographs, and even some reproductions of displays done for major advertising clients and landscape slides done to be shown on movie house screens. (Did I mention that most of the time Schomburg was working for Standard Magazines, he was doing it at night and on his lunch hours while working fulltime for National Screen Service, the movie-poster and theater paraphernalia people?)*

The color reproduces a number of comic book covers, a number of SF magazine covers, a number of the covers he did for the Winston 1950s line of SF books for teenagers, plus two color-composition sketches for the first issues of *Amazing* (found with Hugo Gernsback's initials on the back), plus some other comps for other projects, plus some cover paintings unadorned by the eventual type overlays, plus the aforementioned private fine-art pieces (just large enough to tantalize; most of the other color at least indicates full size, and one unpublished spaceship painting is reproduced just a shade larger than an *F&SF* page — Happen to have a blank cover coming up Ed? I've written stories around Schomburg paintings before, you know.

What I am saying is that Gustafson had the good sense to let his man's work speak for him, though the captions are excellent. But as an editor, Gustafson has not only arranged the art and photos in a meaningful and revelatory continuity, he has interspersed (I would guess) about ten thousand words of his own, very carefully placing it all in the context of the facts of Schomburg's life, and also in the context of history.

We start with the fact that powered flight was two years old when this artist was born and began to perceive the universe, and Gustaf-

* *Of course I didn't. There may be one or two other things I haven't mentioned yet.*

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son carefully walks us through the welter of data that has occurred between then and the book's nearly contemporaneous time, selecting for the broad strokes that acted on Schomburg in particular. In good, unobtrusively deft journalistic prose, Gustafson fully justifies any claim to being SF's premier art-historian, as well as its only certified art-appraiser.

To add to the relevance of his total construct, Gustafson also includes brief appreciations by Richard Pini, Harlan Ellison, Stan Lee, Frank Kelly-Freas, Vincent DiFate, Brian Aldiss and George Barr. What it all adds up to is a portrait of an uncommonly productive, uncommonly various individual who appears to have never mistaken talent and skill for a license to take on airs; a generous, gentlemanly man. Schomburg might have been done better by this field if he'd but had the temperament to call attention to himself instead of just doing the work steadily, and beautifully, over a period of time in which SF as we know it was born from almost nothing, has gone through half a dozen major revolutions and a hundred minor ones, has left behind it, forgotten, a score of illustrators who were THE illustrator of the decade or half-decade, and which to this day in certain circles overlooks the fact that what made our youth, and makes us today, was only in part the words.

It seems necessary to say, because some of you may not have seen that, as DiFate and Freas say, Schomburg taught this field the use of the airbrush. As I say, his black-and-white work displays a most attractive control of line with brush and pen. As Gustafson says, it was above all Schomburg's extraordinary sense of composition, and his intuition for perspective and proportion, that stamped comicbook art forever with his inventions. It was his willingness to work hard that made him not only so vastly productive — and, as Lee notes, always on deadline — but made so many of the individual pieces a feast of rewarding detail. You can get the sense of a Schomburg artwork at a glance; you can then spend hours absorbed in it.

It's not, ultimately, longevity that makes Schomburg's work the icon of our literature; it is Schomburg's work that sustains the longevity. As Gustafson shows us, the man loves his ability to do work. If he also loves us — which I think he does — we are loved by someone who is qualified to do it.

I got this book — as I have gotten several other notable books, including M.J. Engh's *Arslan* — simply as an added benefit of visit-

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ing Moscow, Idaho, where E.E. "Doc" Smith got his degree from the local academy 'round about 1915, and where the "Moscow Moffia" runs one of the most productive novice-writer programs I'm aware of. Usually, these more recent years, I'm there to teach a one-week workshop, and this past August was the latest instance. Bright, hopeful faces greeted me in the course-room. Among them, if the past track record holds good, are several potential practitioners who will soon enough be contributing to these pages and all the other SF media, some of them building reputations reflecting above-average talent and notable ability to entertain.

The point of the workshop is to teach not, so much, writing — most of them have a pretty good grasp of how that's done — but the creation and nurture of a professional's writing career. I can help with that, or, if I can't, others can. But I'm becoming aware that the meaning of the word "career" in SF is beginning to take on permutations never dreamt of at Standard Magazines. There was in those days of the middle decades really only one definition; a pro was someone who could deliver, on time and in high volume, work acceptable to the audience for stories of pluck.

You may think of that as you will; the immediate point is that classic mass-market fiction then demanded the glorification of the Sweat Ethic. Protagonists plainly displayed Judeo-Christian rectitude at first glance, and won their victories by a clearly depicted process of effortful staking of their very existence on solving a problem virtuously. This is in fact still true of mass-market fiction. But it is no longer sweepingly true in SF, and what does that tell you about future sales figures?

Perhaps that is not a worthy concern. There are indeed an increasing number of well-regarded spokesmen who cite as a virtue the fact that SF less and less "caters to the popular taste." This prose construct, the same arbiters will then point out, is their way of politely rephrasing "pandering to the masses." One gets the idea that whatever you call it, the Sweat-Ethic tale plainly told is what every young writer should have stamped out of his or her career intentions.

There's no question that these arbiters — I name no names, but I know the names — are well-regarded, because some of them run writing workshops, some of them teach SF literature and SF writing at major and minor academies, some of them publish respected critical journals, and some of them write SF book review columns for SF magazines. What they say, then, is

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the certified "best opinion" on this matter, and there is no one more vulnerable to the best opinions than a novice writer, for novices comb the entire world for the slightest clue to how to write and, more, what to write that they might win approval.

As a related but not necessarily directly related phenomenon, we're also seeing a proliferation of specialty markets in SF. In the Golden Age of newsstand SF, there were the professional magazines, topped by John Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction*, and then there were amateur magazines, circulated among amateurs, in runs of something like 100 mimeographed or spirit-duplicated copies. Novice writers wrote for those in their best imitation of the professional manner until they arrived in the prozines fully prepared intellectually to continue the prozine mode for another generation, and that was that. Today there are any number of reasonably well-paying markets, in the form of quite professionally produced media, which publish for rather sharply defined sub-audiences within the whole SF audience served by the prozines descended from the Golden Age. Continued, this trend could lead to the SF equivalent of the "little magazines" that cater to sub-audiences within the whole audience for descriptive fiction. Cater to them to the point that in many cases what is judged to be the very flower of American letters is totally segregated away from the bulk of the American audience for fiction.

If this goes on. It is not there yet; at the present time, what's actually being reflected operationally is that the newsstand prozines (in this sense, including the newsstand paperbacks) simply cannot offer enough open pages to sufficiently meet strongly focussed reader-preferences, nor enough open pages to accomodate all the talented newcomers. Not frequently enough to support careers all by themselves. So by any standard, the specialty markets at this time are a very good thing, in particular for the new literary artist and the audience for such new artists. And a similar benefit is being conferred upon the new graphic artists . . . and on the new editors.

We'll wait and see, in other words, whether I'll someday be fully in accord with the equally respected arbiters who are crying doom with regard to this latest evolution in the market, although I make no bones that my sympathies lean much more toward them than they do to their opponents. Operationally, SF has blithely survived worse theoretical crises than that, and I'm keeping it in mind.

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But I was mentioning the new editors. One thing is very, very clear to me, rough-hew it how ye may; this field very badly needs skilled and effective young editors putting operational pressure on the existing "prozine" editors.

Again, I name no names, nor do I cite particular book titles, which is the field of editing with which this column is primarily concerned. But in the last month, I've read the last two books in a science fiction trilogy from a major marketer, the first two books in a heroic fantasy trilogy from another major marketer of this genre who used to bring new writer after major new writer deservedly to the fore; and a VERY heavily advertised science fiction adventure novel from a major marketer who is striving to regain lost prominence. All the writers concerned are talented, ingenious, and sapient. Individual characters are abloom with life — for the most part — and central premises and individual scenes and chapters are realized as well as any such thing is usually done.

And every one of the books is incoherent — riddled with viewpoint-switches, jumbled chronologies, overpopulations of needlessly introduced and unnecessarily named characters, anticlimactic plots, and all the other signs of work done by writers who are being allowed to squirm away from the harder parts of the work. This central defect appears to have become endemic in the field even more swiftly than the field is fragmenting into specialty media.

Any fool with talent, skill and intelligence can write a stunning part. That's a fact, and observation shows it's a fact often demonstrated. A pro writer, serving an audience, no matter what particular audience that writer has freely chosen to serve, is a writer who can make of the parts a whole. That IS the hard part, and novice writers tend to devote much of their ingenuity to finding what they think are viable ways around it. It's the primary function of a professional editor to push them back toward the central purpose of serving the reader, as distinct from parading before the reader.

And those editors do not exist in sufficient number, or need waking up. I can talk about it, and I have. But what will do it is when the sales figures drop below the point where those editorial salaries can be supported. Then many of the publishers will simply switch the relevant portion of their total capital away from SF and into some other category, or into a unit in a chain of hamburger franchises. But some one daring publisher will

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recruit some one hungry editor who is willing to work for slave wages in order to get her or his idea of audience-entertainment out to the mass public, and after her will come the next resurgence in this field, and those of you now in, and misreading the audience, and misdefining your jobs, and comforting yourselves by agreeing with each other, will be out.

I should rephrase some of the immediately above, I suppose.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Tourists, Lisa Goldstein (Simon & Schuster, cloth, 239 pp, $17.95)

THE PARMENTERS are *not* an ordinary family to begin with. Father is an anthropologist who has lost touch with his family; Mother is a quiet drunk whose whole family conspires not to mention the fact that she can't cope without alcohol flowing through her veins.

But the daughters are at the heart of the book. As children, Casey and Angie created a pair of imaginary kingdoms, much as J.R.R. Tolkien did and, a century before, the Bronte children. Casey has grown out of that phase, however, and now engages the world head on — precociously, if you like her; outrageously, if you don't. Angie, though, remains immersed in the imaginary kingdoms and hardly notices the world around her. Particularly she refuses to notice the way boys look at her annoyingly attractive body.

She doesn't even notice when the family trades houses with a professor from the Moslem land of Amaz so that her father can conduct research on an ancient document. But like it or not, the entire family gets involved in an ancient struggle that has dominated the land of Amaz so pervasively that the evidence of the conflict is formed into the very fabric of the city — and yet is completely invisible.

Alongside the fascinating American family, Goldstein has also created, in the heart of the city of Amaz, an odd little street of shopkeepers whose hierarchies and squabbles intertwine themselves with the family in ways that are completely unexpected — and yet exactly right.

Lisa Goldstein's greatest talent

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— among many — is the way she can blend the surreal and the ordinary so seamlessly together that magic seems reasonable and rational behavior seems laden with portent. There's action and danger enough to keep you awake all night reading it, and truth and beauty enough that you'll think, as I did, that it was well worth the loss of sleep.

When I was finished, I was in awe of the artist — but while I read, I had no thought of "art" at all. I fell in love with both the characters and the narrative voice; I forgot to read as a critic and instead reveled in the pleasures of the tale. Nobody in America is writing novels more true and beautiful thatn those of Lisa Goldstein.

The Boy Who Couldn't Stop Washing, Judith L. Rapoport, M.D. (Dutton, cloth, 260pp, $18.95)

First with schizophrenia and now with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), psychologists are finally discovering the bio-chemical roots of many mental illnesses. Rapoport's career began before OCD was named, back when compulsive hand-washing was blamed on domineering parents and obsessive checking (Is the iron on? Am I sure I didn't just run over somebody with my car?) was blamed on bad toilet training or a distorted religious upbringing. Now, though, what was once blamed on parents has been found to have its source in brain dysfunctions, and people who would have been subjected to years of meaningless analysis can often be helped by taking a rather unpleasant pill. In short, psychology is finally becoming a science instead of a religion; today we follow the data instead of the utterances of prophets like Freud, Jung, or Skinner.

But that isn't the primary value of this book. Rapoport, instead of writing bare case studies, has included several accounts by patients themselves, and their stories are as moving as any fiction I've ever read. They describe mental processes that are often disturbingly familiar, as if all of us lived on the edge of these obsessions. Indeed, some of their compulsions seem to grow out of the very capacities that make civilization possible — our innate sense of responsibility or duty.

Here's another reason you should read *The Boy Who Couldn't Stop Washing*: There is cause to believe that one in seventy-five people suffers from this problem. That means if you don't yourself suffer from OCD, you probably know someone who does. Since most OCD sufferers do a damn good job of keeping their "craziness" secret, they often think they're alone. Simply knowing the stories of the people in this book could be an exquisite unburdening.

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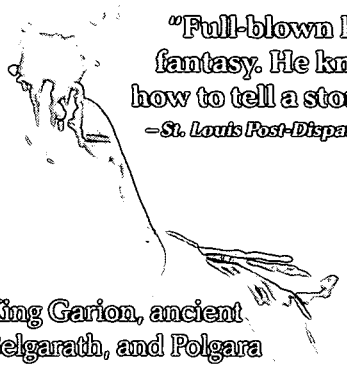

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Eva, Peter Dickinson (Delacorte, cloth, 219pp, $14.95)

A few years ago, Pat Murphy's novelet "Rachel in Love" used the same subject matter as Peter Dickinson's new novel: a human girl whose mind is overlaid on the brain of a chimpanzee, who then has to reconcile her human and animal natures.

Now here is Peter Dickinson moving into the same territory with a young adult novel that proves that just because one author has done brilliantly with a theme doesn't mean that its possibilities have been exhausted.

Like Rachel, Eva is the daughter of a scientist who does research with chimps, and so she has grown up woth them and already knows much about their lives; like Rachel, she is implanted in a chimp's body when ehr natural human body dies. Unlike Rachel, though, Eva's parents are still with her, with all their foibles and virtues. Her father loves his work more than anything — loves her, it seems, more as an experiment than as a daughter. Her mother, whose affection had been unbounding, tries heroically to accept this clever ape as her daughter, but never quite succeeds — a hug from that hairy arm gives no comfort, but only reminds her of what she has lost.

Eva finds her closest relationship with Kelly, the chimp whose body she's using. From the start, she has been aware of Kelly's dream of trees — a dream that survives only at the limbic level, for the forests of Earth are gone, except for postage-stamp scraps here and there. It is the Kellyness of Eva that responds most to an unforgettable fellow named Grog, who comes up with an quixotic scheme to reestablish the chimps, if not in the wild, at least among trees, for Grog believes that the human race is doomed and hopes Eva can prepare the chimps to inherit the Earth.

It is perhaps too easy to say that this is a natural young adult novel, since it deals metaphorically with exactly the crises of adolescence — the replacement of a small smooth body with a large hairy one; the loss of parental affection and the discovery of parental weakness; leaving the known world and striking out into the wild. *Eva*, as with all Peter Dickinson's work, is far more complex than the simple structure and gemlike clarity of voice suggest.

It's enough for me to say that whether you compare it to Dickinson's previous work or to Murphy's "Rachel in Love," *Eva* measures up. I suspect that the only reason Dickinson doesn't have a giant reputation in the field of science fiction is because his writing has all been marketed for children. That's our loss, their gain.

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Here is a strong and suspenseful SF story about a member of a biological exploration team whose body is invaded by a mysterious parasite. Michael Kube-McDowell last appeared here with "When Winter Ends" (July 1985); his recent books include ALTERNITIES (Ace).

MISBEGOTTEN

By Michael P. Kube-McDowell

UNAWARE OF WATCHING eyes in the skies above, the stalking grove-wolf pressed its silent attack on the solitary, sleek-skinned manatree. Circling beyond the reach of the manatree's stubby limbs, the grove-wolf suddenly charged forward, throwing its weight against the fleshy pedestal-leg of its prey.

This time the manatree toppled, the impact and the weight of its attacker bearing it to the ground. Razor jaws telescoped and slashed at the soft, unprotected underbase of the manatree. Straw-yellow ichor spewed from the fatal wound, puddling on the ground as the manatree's limbs curled in the death sign.

"Beautiful," breathed Eric Kimura. "Just beautiful."

Two hundred meters above the haze-shrouded brownlands of Warril VI, Kimura lay facedown, watching, in the transparent access crawlway that ran like a seam along the silver-blue gasbag of the airship *Calypso*. From

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that vantage he enjoyed a view he considered superior to that available to the station's three xenologists.

Imprisoned in the fuselage slung beneath the semirigid balloon, wedded to their stereoscopic widescreen and digital zoom, the XBs rarely saw the planet firsthand. But anytime Kimura could steal a few minutes from his duties as the expedition's gentech, the crawlway offered a private window on the planet's wonders.

Kimura felt a shuddery vibration in the material of the crawlway as *Calypso*'s feather-fan engines labored to hold it in place against a sudden gusty breeze. An instant later a gentle bell sounded in his ear.

"Eric?"

The voice was that of Jayson Ordecht, expedition director. "Here," Kimura said, starting back down the crawlway toward the fuselage.

"How's it coming on the dynamic balancer?"

"Just finishing," Kimura lied. "What's up?"

"Chir'delana is reporting a Monitor off-line in grid 248."

The Draconan Chir'delana headed the station's XB team. "You want me to run up in the skiff and look at it?" Kimura offered, almost too eagerly.

"Not particularly — but Chir'delana does. 248's smack in the middle of the green zone, about ninety minutes north. It's one of the Monitors on the seasonal-change baseline," Ordecht said. "I'd send Archie, but Chir'delana wants him to go down and play with some new corpse."

"All Archie could do is pull it out of the ground and bring it back."

"That, too. Is there anything on your board that won't wait until tomorrow?"

Kimura reached the end of the crawlway and jumped down to the corridor deck. "Not really. Tell Dione for me, so she doesn't think I stood her up for lunch."

"I'll tell her you're out with Betty," Ordecht said. Kimura could almost hear his smile.

It took less than fifteen minutes for Kimura to collect his kit, don an e-suit, and climb into Betty, the second of two skiffs hangered in an open grid beneath the fuselage. Whereas her companion skiff, Archie, sported an array of teleoperated grips and handlers, Betty was a taxi, nothing more — a jet-propelled, three-seat alloy egg.

"Betty. Go grid 248, best speed," he said. The gravwarp skiff dropped

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away from its mount smoothly, banked, and scooted northward. Kimura twisted in his seat to look back at *Calypso*, floating gracefully in the smoggy, mustard-tinted sky.

Calypso. Aerial Survey Platform 11, attached to Biological Station 3, Clypsis Survey, Xenology Division, Advanced Exploration Service. Home. A fifty-meter-long, sixteen-compartment laboratory attached to a huge Drachen dirigible. There was something delightfully antiquarian, almost absurdly Millennial, about the sight of it, Kimura thought. Zeppelins in space. Phineas Fogg on Mars.

Actually, Kimura realized, he had no idea what Mars looked like. He had been born on the AES's advance base in the Draco sector, the second child of an ecologist and a technical historian. Taking his cue (and perhaps his aptitude) from his mother, he had earned his gentech credentials in Service schools on Advent — a cool, watery world grudgingly yielding to terraforming.

Warril VI was dramatically different. It was a world of long days and spectacular sunsets, muggy sixteen-hour days and eternal, chill-damp nights. The sunsets, like the smog, were consequences of the volcanic activity located along the planet's equatorial rift zones. There great mound-mountains like volcanic puffballs dotted Warril VI's elastic crust, venting boiling gases and a thick, slow-moving lava through fissures and cracks.

Kimura would have welcomed a close-up look at the dramatic dome mountains. But *Calypso*'s concern was the biota of the brownlands and the temperate high-latitude green zones — some fifteen thousand species already catalogued, built on two different variants of the F-amino acid set. The airship would spend the entire six months in the planet's Northern Hemisphere, never closer than several hundred kilometers to the equator.

But Kimura did not feel too badly cheated. It was still a marvel to him that he was here at all. Survey took ten or twelve gentechs a year in this sector, all from the top of the ratings. After taking eight years to climb that high, Kimura was well prepared to cheerfully appreciate what he had.

The Monitor stood alone on the high point of a gentle knoll covered with reddish whip-leaved grasses and surrounded by a tangled wall of fibrous growth Chir'delana had named cellhedge. There was no obvious damage: the slender pylon was upright, the silver globe atop it unmarked, the tripod anchor secure and overgrown.

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"Well," Kimura said, looking up the ten-meter length of the pylon. "What's all this, then?" He touched a gloved finger to a contact, and the Monitor smoothly telescoped downward, bringing the sensor-studded globe to a perfect working height. "Logging. Still have power. I'm thinking it was the fault monitor. That's the only other thing that could take it off-line so fast."

It was a matter of a few minutes to break the seals on the globe and uncover the mechanisms within. Kimura's experienced eye quickly spotted a silvery lump filling what should have been an open space between two components. It looked for all the world as though someone had poured a cupful of molten metal into the unit. But when he touched the lamp experimentally, he found its surface pliant, plastic.

"Jayson?"

The answering voice was Dione Welch's. "Not here, Eric. Can I help?"

"Get him."

"He's flying Archie for Chir-delana. I'll get him as soon as I can. What's going on?"

"This Monitor — there's foreign material inside it."

"What kind of foreign material? Something biological?"

He had not seriously considered the possibility until her question put the thought in his mind. Backing a step away from the pylon, he said uncertainly. "That's not supposed to happen."

"It does. My last assay, on Jiphia, we had all kinds of problems with a flying species that perched on top of the Monitors because they *liked* the electric shocks."

"Ria here, Eric," broke in a new voice. Ria Barrow was the junior XB. "Can you describe it?"

"Well — silver-skinned, oblong, like a slug or a big pupa, maybe ten centimeters long and that big around the middle. Sound familiar?"

"No."

"It's not moving. It looks like it shorted out the data chassis of the Monitor. If it was something living, it probably got toasted."

"How'd it get in? Any clues?"

The seals and the top half of the globe had been intact, so Kimura crouched, leaning on his left hand for balance, and scrutinized the bottom half. "Maybe," he called. "There's a hole about the diameter of my little finger along the seam between one of the sensors and the shell metal."

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"I thought you said the thing was ten cents around."

"I did —" Kimura started to answer, when he was distracted by a sudden stabbing sensation in the middle of his palm. "Ouch," he said, more in surprise and annoyance than in pain, and tried to pull his hand away.

But three long red tendrils of whipgrass had become entangled around his wrist, and he could not move his hand more than a fraction. It was like being in a snare —

"Eric? What was that?"

A sudden involuntary shiver ran through him, and a queasy cold blossomed in his stomach. Grabbing a seamer from the kit, Kimura hacked at the wiry strands of grass until he could jerk his hand free. He stared unbelievingly at his palm as a brown-bodied, wormlike *something* vanished into a neat circular hole in the glove.

Speechless, Kimura tore furiously at the binding straps on the e-suit's wrist seal, ripping the glove free and flinging it away.

"No —"

"Eric!"

He did not hear. His entire focus was on the flowing blood, the death-white skin, the neat hole near the heel where the *something* had tunneled into his body. There was a burning pain in his hand, and his forearm began to throb, his body to shake.

"Sweet goddess mother of mystery," he breathed, staring. "It's inside me. It went right inside me."

Then the pain was suddenly everywhere, and he screamed; an animal bathed in fire, all thought banished and consciousness fleeing on its heels.

For three days he was wretchedly, achingly sick. Viselike muscle cramps left him bruised and crippled. He vomited — horrible, wrenching, empty-stomached heaves — until his throat was raw and his body drained. Fragmentary moments of wakefulness served only to force him to relive the terror of his twisted nightmares: visions of worms eating their way through his brain, of being held helpless while he burned.

Then came a time when he awoke, body peaceful, mind lucid, to rediscover that a world outside existed. He saw that he was lying in his own bed in the cabin he shared with Dione Welch, saw her sitting across the room at the library interface, her back to him. Seizing hold of the sight, he let go of the nightmares.

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"It wasn't real," he croaked.

Welch spun around in her chair. There was strain and fatigue in her face, but a moist-eyed relief in her eyes.

"Jason — Brak — he's back," she said into the ship's com, and then was at his side. "How do you feel?"

"It wasn't real," he repeated, giddy. "You can't know — how awful —"

"It was real, Eric," she said with gentle firmness.

He stared at her, puzzled, then slowly raised his left hand and looked at the palm. There was a puckered circle of newskin, pale and featureless, near the heel.

"How long?" he breathed.

"Five days. It's been five days."

Just then Ordecht and Brak Dermot arrived. Dermot, who doubled as team paramedic, came to the open side of the bed. Ordecht lingered near the door.

"Brak —" Kimura extended his injured hand toward the new arrival. "Is it gone?"

Dermot shook his head. "No."

"You didn't take it out?"

"I'm not sure how to. I — we don't know what it is. I don't know what's safe."

"You brought me back inside when I was —" He searched for a comfortable word to describe his status, but found none.

Dermot looked uncomfortably at Welch. "Not my idea."

"Archie picked you up, and they kept you in the skiff for the first thirty-six hours," Welch said. "When you had the bad manners not to die, I made them bring you in."

Kimura pulled himself to a sitting position. "Thanks a lot, Jayson. Thanks for caring."

"You're contaminated," Ordecht said without apology. "Even at biohazard 1, I owe the rest of the team some precautions."

Frowning, Kimura looked at Dermot. "So why aren't I still sick? Is it dead?"

"It ought to be," Dermot said grumpily. "If it's like the rest of the life here, you've got at most one protein in common. Different phospates in your DNA chains, mostly different amino acids in your proteins. It shouldn't have gone after you."

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"Maybe we should just tell it."

"Your body's been trying to. Probably its waste products are what were making you miserable — and driving your immune system nuts. Maybe since you're not dead, that means it is." He took a wand of the diagnostic imager in his hand. "Let's find out."

"Damn."

Kimura frowned. "I hate it when a doctor says that."

"Lucky for you, I'm not a doctor," Dermot said. "Hold still. You're blurring the scan."

"Yeah, lucky."

"I'm serious. I don't know half what you'd like me to about human infections and disease. But I know as much as anyone about parasites."

"Is that what this is?"

"Your other choice is 'predator,'" Dermot said, passing the wand over Kimura's left shoulder. "Hmm."

"Hmm?"

"It may be a moot point. It doesn't seem to still be inside you."

"It is," Kimura said firmly.

"I can't find it," Dermot said, shaking his head. "What makes you so sure?"

"I can feel it."

"Where?"

"It's there, dammit," Kimura said irritably. "Why don't you get someone in here who knows how to use that thing?"

"I'm the best we got. You want to wait for *Alcestis* to come pick you up, I'll go back to my knitting."

"Maybe your machine can't detect an X inside a human body."

"It's the same kind of imager Archie uses when we're poking around a kill. Trust me: you have no secrets. Besides, your visitor showed up just fine when we brought you in."

"Then why can't you find it now?" Kimura demanded, vaulting out of the bed, his body shaking with the restless energy of his impatient anger. "Don't you understand? I've been violated. There's a goddamned alien parasite crawling around in my guts." He smacked the top of the imager with the flat of his right hand. "I can feel it, goddammit, I can feel it. I want it gone. I want it *gone*."

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Dermot's smile was tight and tired, empty of empathy. "I know, Eric. Please," he said, and gestured toward the bed. "I'm trying. Let me work."

AFTER ANOTHER hour of fruitless scanning, Dermot excused himself, saying that he would take the data pack to the XB lab for a more detailed review. It seemed an excuse to Kimura, at least. Embarrassed by his failure, uncomfortable being near Kimura, Dermot had grown increasingly cross. His departure was a relief to both men.

But it left Kimura alone, and alone was not a good place to be under the circumstances. Ordecht had called Welch away for some sort of private conversation, and Chir'delana and Barrow were off with Archie up in 248.

Their conversation, at least, was not private, and Kimura listened in on their com chatter for company.

"I hate doing this," Barrow was saying. "Killing healthy organisms just to carve them up—"

"I know," Chir'delana said. "It's offensive. But it is a parasite that's taken hold of Eric, that's where we'll find more of them, inside the native species. And we need at least one specimen to study if we're going to help Brak treat him."

"He shouldn't have been brought back inside. Dione jacked Jayson on that one."

"Save your indignation," Chir'delana said crisply. "The minute Eric was attacked, this planet went to biohazard 2. We're all going to have to prove we're clean before *Alcestis* will pick us up."

"I just want to make sure I can."

"*I* want to know what kind of F-acid critter can survive a bath in our biochemistry."

There was a brief silence. "What if Brak can't clean Eric out?"

There was a longer silence before Chir'delana's answer. "I imagine that will be Division's decision. Right now I'd have to recommend that he be quarantined here."

"For how long?"

The silence that followed was the longest of all.

"Tondalu," Barrow said at last. "A big one."

"Where?"

"There. Six points starboard, along the rim stream."

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"O.K. I see it. Archie, arm the stinger, please. Ria, get me a good angle—"

Kimura switched off the shipcom, suddenly weary. He had fought fatigue since awakening from the fever-coma, certain that more nightmares awaited him. But the real world had proved no refuge from the ugly and the frightening. Given the choice, he thought resignedly, I might as well sleep.

The next time, it was Chir'delana wielding the imager's wand, with Dermot hovering expectantly nearby. Her face set in a businesslike frown, the gray-haired XB supervisor slowly passed the wand over Kumira's bare chest, narrowing the focus to a small area just below the heart. When she consulted the display, her frown deepened. Wordlessly, she swept through a full-circle scan of her subject's chest cavity.

"My mother's tonsils—" she exclaimed finally, stepping back.

"You see?" Dermot pounced. "You see?"

"See what?" Kimura demanded.

Chir'delana seemed not to hear Kimura. "The boundary layer is inert. Nonnucleated cells."

"Apparently," Dermot said. "But it's all made out of A-proteins. At first I thought it was something Kimura's body was producing in defense — like keloidal scarring."

"No," Chir'delana said, shaking her head. "It is the parasite."

"But look at the volume — fifteen or twenty times the entry size, even allowing for its expanded structure."

"Yes. It must be metabolizing A-proteins as well as the available sugars. I would not have believed—"

"Do I have a right to know what's going on?" Kimura asked sharply, turning to face the quarreling XBs.

Chir'delana looked at him, blinking in surprise. "Of course. We're hiding nothing—"

"I didn't tell him what I suspected," Dermot said. "He may not be following."

Chir'delana nodded, unperturbed. "Something very interesting has happened, Eric. The parasite has built up an encapsulating shell that matches the tissues around it. Your body doesn't know where to find it."

"But you found it."

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"It's made a space for itself between the pleural sac and the spine. If you take a deep breath, you may feel a slight pressure on your lungs."

"Like just a hint of congestion?"

"Possibly."

Kimura nodded. "I've been feeling that since I woke up yesterday. This shell — is it why I'm not sick anymore?"

"Almost certainly. When the parasite first entered, it was like a mouse in the clockwork, throwing everything out of kilter. Now it's found itself a safe little nest out of harm's way."

"Have you found it in any of the native species yet?"

"No," Chir'delana said. "But we will now, I'm sure — now that we know how it likes to hide. It's probably already in our data, but we didn't recognize it. And we do know what the ground-living free phase looks like, of course."

"This also means we can start looking at a way to get it out," Dermot added.

"No," Kimura said.

Dermot stared, taken aback. "Why not?"

Kimura looked to Chir'delana. "This is unusual, isn't it?"

"If it weren't, there would be no such thing as a Class 1 biohazard. Every planet would either be dead or deadly," Chir'delana said. "I know of no other case of an organism bridging a biochemical gap this wide. This organism is an molecular chameleon."

"Then you'll want to know how it does what it did."

"Yes."

"You'll never be allowed to infect another human deliberately."

"True."

"Then you may as well learn as much as you can from me while the parasite and I are getting along."

Dermot sent a questioning glance sideways to Chir'delana. "I think we should get it out of you as quickly as possible, Eric."

"Why? I feel fine. I feel as well as I've felt anytime we've been here — anytime in the past year."

This time the look Dermot sent to the Draconan was a plea for help.

"It would be an invaluable opportunity, Eric," Chir'delana said slowly. "But your life is also invaluable. I can't ask you to assume that risk."

"You didn't ask," Kimura said, reaching for his shirt. "Let's at least wait until you find other specimens."

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"We have the one from the Monitor now," Dermot said quickly.

"Dead," Kimura said. "Not very useful."

"It has not been, in fact," Chir'delaná said. "We would never have predicted this from our examination of it."

"I think Jayson should be involved in this decision," Dermot said nervously.

"Why?" Kimura asked sharply. "Is it his body?"

"This is very dangerous," Dermot muttered, shaking his head.

"I'm not afraid," Kimura said.

They were not brave words. They stated a simple truth. He was not afraid. So clear was that truth, so peaceful and unconflicted his inner world, that Kimura easily shrugged aside the voice that wondered why.

Calypso was crying for Kimura's attention.

In the six days since the attack, a dozen ship's systems had posted maintenance calls on the gentech's scheduling board. None of them were serious, but all were annoying. The dynamic balancer, which juggled the water ballast to keep the airship level and stable, had adopted a two-degree list to port. A navigation interface on the bridge had arbitrarily decided not to accept voice commands. The signal from Number 6 opti-scan was breaking up intermittently.

But when Kimura paged Ordecht to ask for permission to return to work, he met with a stone wall.

"I don't want you leaving your cabin," Ordecht said, shaking his head.

"Look, Jayson, I'm not sick. I've got more energy than I know what to do with. Why don't you let me get at some of these things?"

"You *are* sick. How can you say you're not?"

"I told you: I feel terrific. It isn't going to bother me to go pull a sensor on the port DB tank, or tweak the box on the nav station."

"Just because I wear Command bars doesn't make me an idiot. Parasites reproduce, don't you know?" Ordecht said, tight-lipped. "That thing inside you could be an egg case. How would it be if I let you out, and three hours later a couple of hundred little ones come spewing out of you?"

"That isn't going to happen."

"Is Chir'delana offering guarantees?"

Kimura bristled. "If what's inside me does reproduce, the 'little ones' will be looking for a nice little patch of acidic Warril VI soil, not more

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The thing inside him had somehow made him part of what was happening below.

hosts. And they'll be very disappointed when all they find is carburized deck plate."

"How do you know what they need?"

"Chir'delana said—"

"Chir'delana said that they were chemical tricksters. What's to say that they can't adapt to this environment?"

He's afraid, Kimura belatedly realized. The ignorance embodied in the question was dwarfed by the fear that prompted it. "If I can deal with what's happening inside my body, why the hell can't you?"

"Every time you tell me how good you feel, I worry that much more," Ordecht said pointedly. "I'd be a lot happier if you were still scared to death."

The grove-wolves were running: twenty, fifty, five hundred, five thousand graceful bodies charging head-down across the plain, returning north to the greenlands. The natural maze of the interlocking circles of cell-hedge — fragmentary at first, where one bioclime graded into another — slowed but did not stop them. Paced overhead by *Calypso*, the grove-wolves plunged through the gaps until there were no more gaps, then wriggled through bristly crawlholes, emerging with their brown-gray coats matted with fragments of sticky new growth. In a few days, they (and the seedlings they ferried) would be scattered across several thousand hectares, one mating trio to a cell.

Envy consumed Kimura as he watched them run. The animal images playing across the display of the tiny slate, flat color shadows of reality, mocked him with their freedom. *I should be there*—

He laughed uncomfortably at the thought. Sure. I should be on Warril, running with the grove-wolves. I should be giving the local flora a chance to chew on me from the outside as well as from the inside.

And yet, there was something distinctly different in the way he viewed Warril. It was as though he were somehow plugged into the web of life there, as though the thing inside him had somehow made him part of what was happening below.

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You've got cabin fever, boy, and got it good. Mr. Ordecht, your geotech will be buggy and crazy both if you don't let him out soon —

The door clicked open, and Kimura whirled eagerly toward it. "Dione. Thank goodness. You've been gone almost all day —"

"There's a lot to do," she said, oddly defensive. "A lot of work for the XBs. The library's been at full capacity most of the afternoon. And a flurry of traffic with Sector. Inquiries. Updates."

"It don't matter," Kimura said. "I'm just glad you're here now."

He took a step toward her, but she went the other way, toward the double closet. "Chir'delana wants to put a tracking monitor on you overnight," she said, her back to him as she opened the closet. "She asked me to tell you she'd be in later."

"Later enough for us to take some time out now?"

She went rigid. "I don't have the energy for sex now, Eric."

"Oh — sure. I understand." Sitting back on the bed, he watched, puzzled, as she pawed through her clothes and toiletries. "Listen, you've been out there with the others. Whom can I recruit to lobby Jayson?"

For the first time, she turned and met his eyes. "Why? What do you want?"

"Out," he said, spreading his hands expressively.

"Jayson doesn't think that's safe."

"I know. I need some help changing his mind."

Her gaze flicked downward, and she turned back to the closet. "I don't think it's safe, either. These tricksters —"

So the word had entered the ship's argot as a name for the parasites. "You don't," he echoed.

Silent, Welch pulled a caddy tray and a jumpsuit from the closet and swung the door shut.

"Hey, what's going on here?" Kimura demanded, standing and blocking her path to the door.

"I can't stay here," she said. "I'm sorry."

Dione —"

"I barely slept last night," she said. "And I have to be sharp, for the rest of the team." The explanation sounded rehearsed, barely apologetic.

"Dione — I've got to have some company."

"I'll talk to you on the com. But I'm going to double with Ria tonight."

Kimura stared, wounded. "You don't have to leave right now —"

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"I still have work to do."

"Dione —" He reached out to draw her to him, but she recoiled from his touch.

"No. I can't," she anguished. "I can't. Not while that thing is still inside you."

Reading her eyes, he saw that he had forced her to say what she had come here hoping to hide — a deep revulsion that she could neither justify nor banish. Surrendering, he retreated and let her pass by him and out of the room.

When she was gone, he slumped against the wall, eyes closed, until he had collected himself. *Not her fault,* he tried to tell himself. *Nobody was ready for this. And she doesn't understand* — He sent himself searching for a diversion, settling at last for a *tamka* duel with the computer.

But before long the restless energy, now tainted by rejection, came on him again. On impulse, he called up a month-old record of the two of them playfully making love, and as he watched, he began to idly masturbate. The empty pleasure and sense memories took the sharp edge off his pain, but he could not sustain either for more than a few minutes.

"Cancel," he said in a whisper, and the display blanked. " 'lana."

The Draconan came on the line immediately. "Is there a problem, Eric?"

"If you want to wire me, better come do it now," he said forlornly. "Because in ten minutes I'm going to dose with whites until I can't feel anything anymore."

In the morning, none of it seemed as important as it had the day before. Not Jayson's intransigence. Not *Calypso*'s aches and anomalies. Not even Dione's defection seemed to have the power to touch his emotions. *The serenity to accept things I cannot change* — He felt a quiet peace, a gentle euphoria, like the warmth of afterglow, the clear-eyed calm of hexodrine.

He was aware, too, of something else. At first he did not know what words to use to name it. There was a newness inside him, familiar and foreign. He felt divided, polarized somehow, though the feeling was not an uncomfortable one. It was as though a line had been drawn inside his body to mark the boundary between self and other — a heightened awarness of the life inside him. The trickster was no longer merely a pressure on his lungs. It was now a presence.

And yet, all was one, integrated, harmonious. He shared himself with

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the other life, and it was pleasant, warm. He felt the energy of the other life, and fed from it.

When Chir'delana came to the cabin for a brief morning exam, Kimura did not share his new perceptions. Like a fast-fading memory of a dream, he knew that the search for the right words would guarantee he would not find them, would blunt the fine and delicate edge of the feeling. He said nothing of it, even when the xenobiologist told him that the parasite was growing.

"The capsule is 15 percent larger than last night, and 40 percent larger than when Brak first measured it," Chir'delana said. "By tomorrow it will approach the size of the specimen you found in the Monitor. Are you sure that you're not feeling any discomfort?"

"No," he said, smiling. "No discomfort."

"You would tell me, wouldn't you?" she asked, eyebrow cocked questioningly.

"I feel fine, 'lana. I really do."

"Yes," Chir'delana said, frowning.

"Why does that seem to bother people?"

She met his eyes with her level, unblinking gaze. "Why does it puzzle you?" she asked as she packed away the microsamples of blood and tissue. "They think about what happened to you, and it frightens them. They look at you and wonder why you are not fighting. Why you are not as they think they would be. Why *you* do not wonder at these things."

Kimura shrugged off the challenge in her words. "I haven't done anything wrong," he said. "I don't understand why you aren't all with me."

"They have no experience comparable to yours. They can only think of this as a sickness, and your response as a surrender. In this matter, it is easier for you to be understanding of them than the reverse."

"You didn't include yourself with them?"

She showed a faint, brief smile before she turned for the door. "No," she said. "I have had children."

The oddest thing about her answer, Kimura thought, was that he understood it.

Kimura passed another day and night alone except for Chir'delana's brief but regular "collection" visits and a longer but less satisfying appearance by Dione.

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She tried to be both friendly and cheerful, but the underlying discomfort showed through. Eventually, Kimura wondered aloud if she had been ordered there. Though Dione quickly denied it, Kimura read in her answer that she had, in fact, bowed to some sort of pressure short of an edict. He did not miss her much after that.

Some of the time he spent alone he filled watching the planet below. With six cameras mounted on *Calypso* herself and the output of the extensive array of Monitors to choose from, there was a rich variety of options.

He heard the cracking and popping of a continental glacier as it edged south from the high latitudes — watched nesting grove-wolves sealing the crawlholes to their chosen homes with a tangle of branches — saw manatrees massing on the brownlands to exchange gene cells before going off to begin building new polyps — a hundred planetscapes, some quiet, some vibrant.

And watching, he built what he could only call a longing for Warril VI — a longing that even a visit to his private aerie in the accessway could not have satisfied. And this restlessness, unlike the others he had felt in recent days, did not pass away. It was a binding and a calling, an invitation to union. He began to feel that, as he was to the trickster, they both were to the world below.

When his attention was not focused on the data displays, it was directed inside. Like a blind man in the dark, he reached out for the presence he sensed there and asked to know it. Was there consciousness there, or merely a molecular automaton? Did the trickster feel him as he felt it? Did it feel at all? Hours slipped away easily as Kimura practiced the unpracticed arts of reflection — introspection — contemplation.

Where are you? he asked. But never, he later realized, did he ask, *Where will you be?* That door he made no effort to open.

"Eric — will you join us in the multi? I've called a team meeting to review what the XBs have come up with on your parasite."

The voice was Ordecht's; the surprise, complete. "Are you sure that you don't want me to just monitor from here?"

"I'm sure."

"Well — when?"

"We're gathering now."

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"I'll — I'll be there in five."

Kimura struggled with disequilibrium. He was the cat, closeted too long, suspicious at the sight of an open door, uncertain whether it led to anyplace he wanted to be.

But he went, the corridors and cabins of *Calypso* striking his eyes with such unfamiliarity that they seemed to belong to an alien world. The faces of Dermot, Barrow, and Ordecht, looking up at his from around the table in the multi, were those of dimly remembered strangers.

When Kimura was seated, Ordecht signaled his readiness to Chir'delana with a nod.

"The entire XB department has been logging long hours on this problem," she said. "Ria and Brak have been superb. The results have been very positive. We've learned a great deal about what's inside Eric."

"So have I," Kimura said.

They chose to take it as a joke, smiles and polite laughter. "In the process, we've also learned a great deal about Warril VI," she continued. "Even outside our lab, I think it's common knowledge that life here is based on proteins built from the F-amino set — twenty-two left-handed amino acids, five of which are also in the A-amino set on which our proteins are based."

Ordecht nodded again..

"It has been received wisdom in xenobiology that the F-aminos are far enough away from the A-aminos to form a deep biological gulf between the proteins they build — and, by extension, between the organisms built on those proteins. These past few days, the tricksters have taught me differently. They can bridge that gap."

Kimura became aware that, although Chir'delana was addressing them all, both Dione and Ria were watching him instead.

"They can do this," Chir'delana continued, "because they employ a biochemistry that allows them to parasitize a wide range of Warril's native species. We have found the adult phase in nine major chemoorganotrophs, some of which have almost as little in common with each other as we do with them. The range of protein chemistries involved is astounding.

"The trickster represents one of the cleverest bits of organic engineering I've ever seen. The ground-living phase — the 'plant,' if you will — produces a transfer cell that is almost completely information, that says, 'This is what I know.'

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"Apparently, when the transfer cell enters the host, it 'looks up' the host's chemistry in its chemical library. If it can't find an entry, it goes underground — builds an enclosing membrane of native material and sets out to analyze the chemistry of the hosts."

"Like a little biochemistry lab," Welch said.

"Like a very good biochemistry lab," said Barrow, seated beside Kimura. "It's smart as hell, chemically speaking."

"Go on," Chir'delana invited, sitting back.

"To complete the cycle, and the story: the trickster that can survive in a new host makes large numbers of a much smaller transfer cell containing what amounts to an abstract of the secrets of its success — one that says, 'Here's what I've learned.' When one makes its way back to one of the parent forms, the information is merged, and reproduction follows."

"So right now the trickster inside Eric is analyzing human biochemistry," Ordecht said, "and preparing to pass on what it discovers?"

"Yes."

"And if it does so, it will become much easier for the tricksters to infest other humans."

"Yes," Barrow said.

The heavy-handed choreography of the meeting suddenly became apparent to Kimura. Give him what he wants and let him out, so he'll be more kindly disposed — bring him together with the family and make him feel he's part of the decision — then turn the screws. *My friends* —

So you have a diagnosis," Welch said. "Do you have a cure?"

Not surprisingly, it was Dermot's turn. "Luckily, we're not too shabby at the biochemistry business ourselves," he said. "Even though the trickster's hiding from Eric's body defenses in that capsule, it *is* feeding off him — metabolizing material drawn from his tissues. That gives us a way to go after it."

He patted the small, soft pouch lying on the table. "Eric, we've come up with a host-restriction endonuclease — a cleavage enzyme — that will slice through the trickster's memory proteins like a hot wire through a spiderweb. Molecular dissection."

"What about effects on Eric?" Welch asked.

"None. The enzyme won't find the target molecular bonds anywhere in his biochemistry." He looked at Kimura. "You won't feel a thing."

"Terrific," Ordecht said. "Terrific work, everyone. Well, Eric — some

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good news at last. The end of this probably can't come too soon to suit you. Brak, will you do the honors?"

Dermot reached for the pouch and started to stand, but Kimura was quicker to his feet. "No," he said.

"No?" Ordecht echoed.

"Eric —," Welch began.

"No," Kimura repeated, backing toward the door.

"Son of a bitch," Ordecht said, slowly rising from his chair. "'lana, I apologize. You were right. Eric — slow down a moment and think this through. Listen to what we're saying."

"I listened," Kimura said. "You want to kill what's inside me — because *you're* afraid of it. I'm not being harmed."

"The fact that you don't want to get rid of it ought to tell you how wrong you are."

"Reason is not enough, Jayson," Chir'delana said. "Emotion is involved."

"I can't help that," Ordecht said, irritated. "Eric, maybe you don't get it. Unless we destroy the parasite, you can't ever leave here."

"That's months away. And there'll be another team coming."

"Not after this," Ordecht said. "Not with you as proof that it's not safe here."

"You don't understand," Kimura said, retreating, his face contorted by anguish. "You don't understand. I can feel it living in me. I don't want to feel it die."

THOUGH HE fled the room, they would not let him escape. Dione swept out of the multi on his heels, fire-eyed and furious.

"You goddamned idiot. *You're* the one who doesn't understand," she shouted, following him down the corridor. "It's got you so doped with your own neurohormones you can't think straight."

"You can't make me kill it," he mumbled, almost inaudibly, his feet still carrying him away from confrontation.

"I can rub your nose in your own stupidity," she fired back. "Ask 'lana to show you the graphs. You're being manipulated, juiced with shots of warm fuzzy every time you get close to rebelling at what's happened to you."

Calypso was a small world. All too quickly, Kimura found himself in the forward mechanicals compartment, with only the access crawlway

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left for escape. His steps slowed, and he turned to face Dione.

"You don't have the right to tell me what to do," he said.

"Eric — I don't want to tell you what to do," she said, her voice softening. "I want you to see what needs to be done. Raise your eyes and look past today. Look past what you're feeling now, however wonderful it is."

"It *is* wonderful."

Frustration contorted her features. "Can't you see what you have to give up to keep it?"

Chir'delana had joined Dione as she was speaking, coming up behind her from the corridor. "Dione — he's chosen to be separate from us," she said. "Leave him alone."

"But —"

"He can't hear you now. He can hear only himself. Let him be."

Dione hesitated, then lowered her eyes and nodded. And then they left him. He waited, expecting Ordecht, expecting Dermot. Expecting them to enforce their view of what was best for him. He waited a long time before he could believe they were not coming, before he could let himself hope that they might leave him alone.

And when he did at last begin to believe, he clambered up into the access crawlway and settled into his familiar spot. The world below was peaceful, and he tried to let go of the conflict and tension and feel the same peace inside.

But he could not find it.

I need more distance, he thought desperately. *I have to leave —*

And: *I can't count on them. They're just waiting for me to give in —*

And: *Who is thinking these thoughts?*

And then he returned to his cabin to find Dermot's little pouch waiting for him on the bed.

"My friends —," he said. "My friends."

"Thank you," Kimura said. He stood propped up in a far corner of the cabin, arms crossed nervously over his chest.

Chir'delana nodded gravely and perched on the end of the bed. "Is something happening?"

"What did Dione mean, about the graphs? Is there something you haven't been telling me?"

"Only that which you are not capable of believing."

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"What do you mean by that?"

Shrugging, she said, "If you feel pleasure, and I tell you that the pleasure is false, your own experience denies my claims. I read the scans and see endorphins and enkephalins arising not from the pituitary, but from elsewhere in your body — placental hormones from a placenta you do not possess, the genes activated from your X chromosomes — a hexodrine drip at precisely the dosage to create a feeling of well-being. These mean much to me, but little to you."

"You don't want me to be happy," he accused.

Chir'delana shook her head. "Untrue, Eric. Nor does what I want matter. You claim the right to choose for yourself. I accept that claim, and have obliged the others to accept it as well," she said. "But I claim in return the right to ask you who or what is choosing."

"I am."

"So long as you are certain." She rose to her feet. "Was there more?"

"No."

Nodding, she turned toward the door.

"Yes," he said suddenly. He took a tentative step outward from the corner. "I've been wondering what it will become."

"It is what it will become," Chir'delana said. "Perhaps you should wonder instead what you will become."

It was a gentle rebuke, but a rebuke all the same. But he did not let it stop him from asking the question he had called her there to ask. "'Iana — is it intelligent?"

"Do you think it is?"

"I don't know," he said. "Sometimes."

"It is such an easy question, and such a hard answer," she said, her smile soft and maternal. "Not a question merely of biology, but of philosophy and spirituality. You ask if the trickster is intelligent, and I have no answer. I know only that you are."

Kimura knew there would be screaming. There had never been any hope of avoiding that. It was enough if he could avoid being stopped.

They should have locked him in, killed his cabin terminal and locked him in. But they were still being reasonable, still giving him room. Too much room. They should have locked him in, but they did not. So it was easy. Easy for him to unravel Ordecht's command lock on the ship's skiffs.

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Easy for him to freeze the ship's systems for the three minutes it took to board one and be gone.

They knew, the moment they were free, what had happened, what mistake they had made. They called to him, words of anger and apostasy, reason and suasion. He did not turn off the com and shut them out — it was their right to rail. Nor did he answer. He listened to the words meant for him, and to the words they meant for each other, with roughly equal concern.

"This crosses the line, Kimura. You've taken the choice out of my hands. We're going to come after you, and we're going to bring you back. That is a fact—"

"Archie's cold and dark, Jayson. He scrambled the O.S. good."

"We can reload from the library in about forty minutes—"

"Eric, don't make things worse. Give me a chance to keep this in the family—"

"What's happening? Where's Eric?"

"He's taken Betty."

"Where's he going?"

"From the track, back to 248—"

"Eric, you can't take the trickster home—"

"He also took the injector."

"He did?"

"Well, it's not in his room—"

"What's he going to do, teach them about that, too? Goddamn chip-head—"

Kimura looked down at the seat beside him and the pouch resting there. He touched it tentatively with one finger, and felt the hardness of the injector cylinder through the cloth. Then he looked out the t-port at the scrub-hedged greenlands below. Already the skiff was slowing.

What was *he going to do?*

What I want to, came the quick answer. *What* I *want to*—

"Eric — please—"

The same voice asked in his mind's ear, Can't you see what you have to give up to keep it?

What I *want*—

"Betty," he said. "Abort last command. Go 51, best speed."

* * *

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Eric Kimura walked a hundred meters from where the skiff rested, and settled cross-legged on the dry, sterile ground. The air was thick, choking, the ground warm to the touch. Seven spewing gas vents dotted the face of the great turtle-shell mountain rising before him. Ropy pillars of lava squirmed and toppled in slow motion like pyroclastic worms.

The decision was already made. He had made it the moment he had turned Betty southward, turned her away from the greenlands for the dead expanses of the rift zone.

But a decision was not an action, was not a promise to anyone but himself. He held the pouch cradled on his lap and let tears run down his cheeks, let himself think his rheumy eyes were the product of sulfur dioxides and fly ash.

Only partly alive. It's really only partly alive. The rest is me. And I'll still be here.

The ground quivered beneath him, a faint echo of a feeble earthquake, of turgid pools of lava slowly shifting somewhere below. *When it's gone, I'll know,* he thought. *I'll know which part was me and which part was it. What I wanted and what it wanted. I'll know, even if it will be too late to use the knowledge. At least I'll know —*

He folded back the flap of the pouch, and the injector fell into his hand.

I will never know this feeling again. What I give up now, I give up forever.

The stop-catch on the injector surrendered to a soft twist.

But what I claim now will be mine forever. Not a bad trade. Not such a bad trade. Killing to live. To live free. To take the choices back.

Inside the cylinder, twelve milliliters of coppery solution waited. At eye level, it shimmered in the late sunlight.

It's easy, they said. You should be glad to be rid of it. It won't affect you at all, they promised. Empty, bleating words from ignorant mouths.

If you feel — if you know — forgive me —

It was not easy, even if it was right. Touching the injector to his skin, thumbing the trigger until the cylinder was empty — they were nearly impossible acts. Cold acts. Acts of self-violation, a voluntary reprise of the initial horror.

But somehow it was done.

Kimura stayed there, seated before the heaving, groaning dome moun-

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tain, until the line between self and other dissolved, until the presence within was only a pressure and then not even that, until the space that had been life was an emptiness, and he was alone.

Until he knew.

The right choice, he thought. *What* I *wanted.*

He only wondered, flying back to *Calypso* with eyes still wet with acid tears, how long the emptiness would be an ache where joy had once been.

EINSTEIN CONDUCTS A THOUGHT-EXPERIMENT
IF A PERSON WERE TO WAKE UP VERY EARLY - SAY 5 A.M. BEFORE SUNRISE - AND ATE BREAKFAST IMMEDIATELY, HE COULD EAT LUNCH AT ABOUT 10:30 A.M. BY 3:30 OR 4 P.M. HE COULD PROBABLY EAT ANOTHER LUNCH. WHAT A BREAKTHROUGH - TWO LUNCHES IN ONE DAY!
J. Harris

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Dean Wesley Smith lives in Eugene, Oregon, where he is publisher of Pulphouse; The Hardback Magazine. *He has also sold about two dozen short stories and a novel that was recently published by Warner Books. His first story for F&SF is a post holocaust tale with an unusual and unsettling twist.*

WHERE HAVE ALL THE GRAVEYARDS GONE?

By Dean Wesley Smith

At the time of the limited nuclear war of the summer of 1991, there were an estimated 2 million residents of nursing homes in the United States alone. In the first few hours of the war, all of the staff of the nursing homes, with very few exceptions, left to join their own families. Even though exact figures are impossible to obtain, it is estimated that over half of those dependent-care patients died within the first week after the war.

Harold Burgett, Ph.D.
Who Really Died in the War, Daddy?
Concert Press, 2007

"WE'RE GOING TO HAVE to do something," I said as everyone got settled in the small office. "Mrs. Hodges, in the room next to mine, is starting to smell. Enough that it clogs up even my old nose."

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Starting to smell didn't begin to describe it. Mrs. Hodges had been a scrawny little woman with a high voice and a constant complaint. She had died the first morning after everything shut down and all the staff left. It seemed she needed some sort of special medication, and there was no one to give it to her.

That was five days ago. Yesterday I'd covered my nose, gone in, and tossed a bunch of blankets and some clothes on top of her in hopes of slowing down the smell. No luck. The air in the hall near her door brought tears to my eyes, which was nothing to what it did to my stomach.

I looked around at James, Edda, and Carl, the other three residents on the emergency council who had crowded into the Hillside Manor's small head nurse's office in the eighty-degree heat of the morning. Barbara, the R.N. and only staff member who had stayed when the sirens went off, sat facing us behind the small desk.

Barbara nodded. "Scully's right, I'm afraid. It's getting bad all over the center. Anyone have any ideas?"

I watched Barbara as she glanced at each of us. She had been a young, happy sort of nurse before all this. Now her long black hair looked unwashed and almost caked solid in her ponytail. She had dark circles under both eyes, and her once-white uniform had turned brown from sweat and spots of food and blood. I couldn't remember seeing her sleep or even take a break in the past five days.

"It's even worse over on my wing," Carl Norville said. "We got three dead from the first two days, and I think old Mrs. Bell is about to join them. We've opened windows and stuffed towels around the doors, but we're going to have to take the bodies somewhere, if to do nothing but cut down on the number of flies."

Damn, I liked Carl. He was like my son, Johnny. He just laid it out on the line, no frills, no holding back. From the first moment, he had been one of the most level voices. His room was down on the west wing, and he had organized all the ambulatory residents in that area and had them working before Barbara could even get the main-area buzzers stopped and the residents started taking care of themselves. He was one of the few who bothered to get out of his bathrobe and dressed every day. This morning he wore a green shirt and dark slacks, and he had a five-day-old growth of white beard covering his face.

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Sitting on the folding chair to the left of Carl was Edda. Barbara had appointed her to represent the residents of the north wing. She very seldom said a word, and half the time forgot to close her pink bathrobe. I couldn't figure out what Barbara was thinking when she appointed Edda. It was frightening to imagine that Edda might be in the best shape of anyone in that wing.

The fourth member of the council was James Toole. He lived in the south wing, wore the same blue sweater day after day, and smoked a pipe that Barbara wouldn't let him light anytime she was around. Especially not in the small office where we held our twice-daily meetings. Usually he twisted the pipe in his wrinkled hands and half-pretended to not be listening. But I knew he was. Not much got past James.

"I agree with Carl," I said. "I've got four bodies in my wing besides Mrs. Hodges, and by nightfall I figure we're going to have at least twenty in the building. We got to start doing something about them now, this very morning, or none of us are going to want to live here."

"Maybe," James said, looking up at Barbara, "we should put them all in one room and close it off. Might have to move a few folks out of the rooms close by."

"They should have a good Christian burial," Edda said. She looked over at me and then at James. "Christian, you hear?"

I laughed, and so did James. I couldn't figure out how we were going to move the bodies, let alone have the strength or energy to bury them. With my bad back, legs that worked only when they wanted to, and eighty-five-year-old muscles, I could barely lift a light chair, let alone a dead body. And I was one of the healthiest in the home.

I knew James had trouble every morning just getting himself out of bed, and Carl was bent over from arthritis. Barbara was the only one strong enough and who had the training to move bodies, but she was only a small drift of a woman, barely five-two. As tired as she was, I doubted if she could move more than one or two, let alone twenty.

"I'm afraid," Carl said, holding up his twisted, arthritic hands, "that none of us are capable of moving or burying anyone. Let's face the fact that we're going to need help."

"Are you willing to go down into those streets?" I asked. "I know I'm not. At least not yet. I feel we've been damn lucky to have been ignored this long."

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Everyone sat quietly for a moment, and I could tell they agreed with me. The nursing home was tucked into the side of a hill above a residential district. Yesterday a woman's scream had us all gaping out the office window. Seven men dragged the screaming woman from the third house down the street, then shot another man who tried to come to her rescue. One man took the woman off down the hill while the other men carried boxes from the house and loaded them in an old truck. The man's body still lay on the grass this morning.

"I don't think going for help would be wise," Barbara said. "We are forgotten here for the moment, and I think it better we remain that way until things calm down and order is restored. James, did you finish getting the food supplies scattered?"

James nodded. "We got it stashed in the tops of all the laundry closets, plus a few other places. We left enough for today and tomorrow in the kitchen, along with what's left of the meat and perishables."

Barbara nodded. Our fear yesterday, after watching the scene on the street, was having someone come in and take all the food. Death didn't seem to bother anyone in this place. I suppose when you lived with it every day, you sort of got used to it. In fact, most of us were ready and waiting for it. But the fear of starving had sent us all scurrying to hide the food.

I had been one of the most anxious to do so. I had vivid memories of being hungry for three days while snowed in on a deer-hunting trip into the Idaho mountains. That was forty years ago, before Johnny was born, and I still remembered the hunger like it was yesterday. I never wanted to feel that helpless again.

"I'm afraid," Barbara said, glancing down at the desk and then back at James, "that I'm not strong enough to move bodies. At least not many. But I think with some help from a few of you residents, we might be able to roll the beds. Suggestions?" She glanced around the room, first at me, then back at James.

He shook his head. "There's nowhere in the home, outside the lunchroom, that's big enough to hold even ten beds, let alone twenty. We're going to have to take them outside."

"But if we take them outside," Carl said, "there's a chance it's going to attract attention. If it brings the wrong kind, we're defenseless."

I nodded. "That's the last thing we want to do."

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Barbara sighed and folded the paper. "O.K. For now let's get a body count. Mark them with tape on the big board above the nurse's station. I've got to make a round and see what I can do to at least stem the tide a little. Scully, find me and let me know exactly what we're dealing with. And if anyone has any ideas, let Scully or me know. We'll meet back here after lunch to see what we can come up with."

I nodded. "Everyone check every room in their wing."

"I still think they should get proper Christian burials," Edda said.

Barbara patted her on the shoulder. "We'll see what we can do."

It would seem logical that during a time of crisis, the elderly would be protected and taken in by their families. But in the limited war of the summer of 1991, that was generally not the case. Many children were separated from their parents by great distances, and the sudden stoppage of all transportation and communication made it impossible for either side to go to the other. And an unusually large percentage of the residents of nursing homes simply had no family or friends left.

Harold Burgett, Ph.D.
Who Really Died in the War, Daddy?
Concert Press, 2007

WITH MY bad back, and legs that sometimes seemed to have minds of their own, I was a slow shuffler on my best days. But at least I still got around. That was better than Mary had done her last few years. Johhny always said I was just too damn stubborn to ever stop. I figured he was right.

But now, with five days of little sleep and lots of excitement, I had to stop and rest every twenty feet just to catch my breath. Sometimes I was far too near Mrs. Hodges's room to want to take many deep breaths.

Two hours after the meeting, with my slow shuffle-rest, shuffle-rest pace, I finally finished my wing count. Five dead, two more close. Fifteen who wouldn't even bother getting out of bed. I figured they would slowly die over the next week or so since there weren't enough of the rest of us to feed them all the time.

Six could move around and wanted help, but were wheelchair-bound. That left three of us who could walk, although Dan Cannon's mind was gone and he spent most of every day standing beside his door and humming. Eight beds were empty. Their occupants had been the lucky ones.

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They had either left with relatives or simply wandered off in the mass exodus the first few days after the trouble started.

I was the last to finish marking the main board over the nurse's station. Twenty-three already dead. If every wing had the same ratio of near deaths and soon-to-be-deads as I did, the situation was hopeless. To stay here, those of us who could move around were going to have to take care of upward of sixty bodies. Not possible. It just couldn't be done.

I shuffled down the hall to the main sitting room. Picture windows overlooked the parking lot and the subdivision below. James was sitting on a couch in front of the window, smoking his pipe and staring out over the city.

I dropped down next to him without a word.

"Sure is strange why nothing is moving," he said, pointing out at the city. "Not one car, nothing. Can't even get anything on my battery radio. Real strange."

"EMP," I said. "It's something that comes from atomic bombs and shorts out anything that's electronic for thousands of miles. My son, Johnny, explained it all to me once."

"So how come the cars don't work?"

I shrugged. "Johnny said all the recent cars have electronic ignition. Some of the old classic cars might work, but nothing more. That's why those men were using that old truck the other day. Must have been an early-fifties Ford."

"So you think we finally did it to ourselves, huh?"

I nodded and looked out over the quiet neighborhood. "It seems that way. Let's just hope it's not too widespread."

We both sat thinking. I started to wonder for the tenth time in the past few hours if Johnny was all right, then stopped myself. My son could take care of himself. If Mary and I had taught him anything, we taught him that. And with him and his new wife living down in Florida, there was not a damn thing I could do to help him. Or him to help me, for that matter. I was glad Mary didn't live to see this day.

I forced myself to stop thinking about my family and concentrate on the problem at hand. What to do with the bodies? Maybe close off one wing altogether and move everyone? That might work. The live ones out, the dead ones in. It would be a massive project that would take days, but it was the only idea I had.

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"You know," James said, pointing his smoking pipe at the houses down the street. "There's going to be some mighty hungry people in those homes real soon. Parents with starving kids make for mean folk. I wager we get a few raiders up here sometime soon. Probably at night."

I stared down at the modern two-story homes that lined the streets, and then at the man's body still lying on his front yard. I hadn't really thought of it that way before. I had been afraid of the gangs from downtown, but James was right. It was soon going to be the everyday suburban man and woman that we were going to have to worry about. Especially since we had food and they didn't. And we had enough to keep the dwindling home's population going for as long as any of us would want to keep going. The problem was how to defend it.

Or if we even wanted to try.

I was the one who ended up finding a solution to our problem.

"You know," James said as we moved slowly down the hall toward Mrs. Hodges's room, "this isn't going to stop anyone who really wants to get in here?"

"Of course it won't," I said. "Nothing will, really. Too damn many windows. But one thing is for certain: this is going to make them think twice about it."

James nodded. "That it is. Are we going to be able to handle her? We could call Barbara."

"We took care of the others. We can do this one, too."

I hoped I sounded optimistic. The other four bodies had been nowhere near as far into decomposition. And we'd moved them only to the back door off the end of the wing. Mrs. Hodges had to be moved to the front door.

It had been right before our afternoon meeting, while staring out the front door, that I came up with my idea. I figured that since those of us still living were going to have to spend so much time and energy taking care of the dead, why not have the dead help defend us from the food raiders?

It was a ghoulish idea and risked drawing attention outside, but the plan was simple. There were six major doors into the nursing home, plus a big metal door in the kitchen area that we had securely locked. The main six leading out onto the sidewalks were double doors made of glass, with

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another set of double doors spaced inside to create an air lock to keep the cold drafts from blowing down the halls.

I figured we had enough bodies to roll two beds outside of each door, then lock the outside doors and put two or three more beds inside the air lock and then lock the inner doors.

That would create a barrier of decomposing bodies between the remaining residents and the outside world that not even a person with an iron stomach could stand to climb over. Of course, as Jim said, anyone who really wanted to get in could break a window in one of the rooms and come in that way. We'd never be able to stop them. Our main hope was that they'd go to the doors first and have the smell and the flies turn their stomach enough to make them move on.

As Carl said when he voted to do it over Edda's objections, "It's better than doing nothing."

"You ready?" James asked.

We had reached my door. Mrs. Hodges was in the next room. I glanced back down the long, dark hallway toward the nurse's station and the front door. We were going to have to push her a long ways. One damn long ways. But it had to be done.

"Ready as ever."

James nodded and pulled out a small flask that looked like it had seen some good times over the years. He had filled it with gas siphoned from the emergency generator. He unhooked two small towels from his belt and handed one to me. "This ain't going to be pleasant."

"There's no way I can go in there without it."

James glanced around at Mrs. Hodges's door and grimaced. "I think you're right." He unscrewed the cap on the flask and poured a small amount of gas onto my towel first, and then his.

I closed my eyes and put the towel, gas and all, against my nose. For a minute I thought the smell was going to overwhelm me, but somehow I held on, and after a short moment the sharpness of the smell faded and my insides settled as much as they were ever going to.

I tied the towel around behind my head like a bank robber's mask. "Ready?"

James nodded and led the way into Mrs. Hodges's room.

Even with the gasoline damn near killing my sense of smell, I was still nauseated by the thick air in the room. As quickly as I could, I unlocked

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the wheels on the near side of the bed and then moved around to help James push.

It seemed forever before we got the bed moving. We banged it twice against the wall on the way out of the room, and both times angry black flies swarmed from underneath the pile of blankets and clothing.

All I wanted to do was go and be sick. The hall stretched for miles, James and me silent, the bed's wheels clicking over the tile floor. I leaned against the back of the bed and pushed by falling forward, using my weight against the back rail and hoping my legs would catch up before I ended up being dragged along.

Barbara was sitting in the nurse's station as we neared. She turned white and moved quickly toward the front door ahead of us and the thick smell. I had no doubt that I was going to have to toss out the clothes I had on. And no matter how long I stood under the cold water of the shower, I knew I would never quite get the smell off.

Carl and Barbara had the front doors propped open by the time we got there. We were going to put Mrs. Hodges to the right of the front door, then roll two more bodies in beside her to completely block the main entrance.

But it didn't quite work out that way.

Carl and Barbara had moved a distance away along the sidewalk that ran around the building. As James and I gave Mrs. Hodges's bed a hard shove to get it over the outside doorjamb, James tripped and let go of the bed to catch himself.

There was no way I could hold that heavy bed by myself. No way. I was too weak from the smell and all the work of the past few days.

The metal frame of the bed pulled from my hand, and the bed started down the sloped front sidewalk toward the parking lot, its wheels clacking on the concrete in an angry complaint.

It seemed to be going so slow. So easy to catch. I made a grab for it, but my legs failed, and I ended up on my knees. Barbara started after it, but she had moved too far away along the building, and the bed was moving far too fast before she got back even with me.

So the four of us watched as Mrs. Hodges's bed picked up speed down the sidewalk, the sound of its wheels on the concrete echoing over the silent neighborhood. Halfway down, a few of the clothes I had piled on the bed flew off and scattered on the lawn.

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By the time the bed reached the end of the sidewalk and dropped off the curb into the parking lot, the blankets had flapped back, and I could see Mrs. Hodges's white legs.

As if in slow motion, the bed skated across the slanted parking lot, picking up more and more speed. For a moment I thought it might make it to the street and continue on down past the houses of the subdivision like a wild ride at an amusement park. Who knew where it might end up? Maybe it would never stop.

But we couldn't have been that lucky.

Slowly. Oh, so very slowly, the bed drifted to the right.

One moment I thought the bed was going to clear all the cars and make the street, the next it smacked broadside into a blue sedan.

Mrs. Hodges was tossed from the bed like a log out of a chute. She hit the side of the car with a loud thump that echoed off the houses and the green hillside.

The bed bounced once, tipped over, and came to rest upside down, its wheels spinning silently.

Like thick clay, Mrs. Hodges slid down the side of the car into a heap beside the front wheel, her nightgown bunched up under her arms, and her head twisted sideways, her blank eyes staring back up the hill at us.

"Christ," James said, very softly.

The true enemy of the elderly during the limited war was not the gangs or the criminals, but the middle-class adults with children to feed. Many of those adults, who one moment naturally worried about the health of their own absent parents, found themselves taking the food of an elderly person who lived close by. It never occurred to most that the exact same act was likely being done against their own parents.

Harold Burgett, Ph.D
Who Really Died in the War, Daddy?
Concert Press, 2007

THE HOTTEST part of the ninth afternoon had just passed, and the defense by the dead of the nursing home had lasted three days longer than I had expected. Carl, Barbara, and I were going over the rationing plan, when James whistled from the front room and motioned for us to join him.

By the time I got there, all three of them were standing motionless,

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staring out over the front lawn and past the body of Mrs. Hodges at a crowd of ten men who had gathered in the middle of the street. Two of the men wore army camouflage clothing, probably National Guard. Every one of them carried some sort of gun.

"My guess is they're coming this way," Carl said.

"I think he's right," James said. "A couple of them have been gesturing up the hill in this direction and doing a lot of talking. I bet we won't like what they're talking about."

"Anybody know of a gun close by?" Barbara asked.

She knew the answer to that question. Residents of nursing homes weren't allowed to keep guns. The powers that used to rule figured we were all too unstable. And during regular times I thought it a good rule. But right now I wasn't too pleased.

"So what do we do?" Carl asked.

"Hide," I said. "It's the only thing that makes sense. We certainly can't fight them."

"I'll agree with that," James said. "Here they come."

He was right. As a unit the men has turned and started up the street toward us. They all looked determined. There was no way in hell our dead-body defense was going to hold unless the dead found guns and learned how to shoot real fast.

"So where do we hide?" Barbara asked. I could hear the panic starting to creep into her voice for the first time since the staff had all left and she had become responsible for over a hundred lives. She'd done an incredible job holding a sinking bunch of old humans together. But she was powerless against the stupidity of animals with guns.

"Pretend to be a patient," I said. "Get in one of the empty beds, put on someone's old wig, and pretend you're dying like the rest of us. We can sit out here in the open because we really don't threaten them. Face it, they're going to find some of the food. Let's just hope they don't find it all."

"Get going, Barbara," Carl said. "We'll do our best to stall them."

Barbara nodded with a blank look, turned, and headed down the hall of the south wing.

"Grab a chair, gentlemen," James said. "We got company to entertain."

James dropped down on the couch in front of the main window. Carl went over and sat down in the overstuffed chair beside the piano, and I shuffled over to the chair closest to the main door.

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Just as I got settled, the sound of breaking glass echoed from the direction of the first few rooms of the west wing.

"Thought that's where they'd come through," James said. "Less shubbery than the other side of the main door."

"Hope no one was in the room," Carl said.

I turned slightly so I could see down the west hall. Two men in jeans and short-sleeve shirts appeared, rifles held in a combat-ready position. They quickly checked the empty hall in both directions. Then one signaled to someone inside the door, and the other men filed out of the room and started toward us. The lead two men wore the army camouflage uniforms and carried army-issue weapons. The rest were dressed in usual work-around-the-house clothes and looked out of place carrying deer rifles.

They got to the nurse's station, spotted us, and stopped. One of the men in camouflage pointed down the east hall and indicated two men go that way. He did the same for the north and south halls. He had the rest follow him into the lounge to face us. Four men with guns against three unarmed old men who could barely walk.

Carl looked up from a magazine he had been pretending to read. "What can we do for you gentlemen?"

The leader stepped past me with a cold look and faced Carl. My stomach clamped up tight, and I felt as if the entire room could hear my heart pounding. The guy's eyes were like a rabid dog's eyes before it went for your throat. Insane, cold eyes. There was going to be no reasoning with this guy. None. I hoped Carl saw that.

"We're here for food." The man's voice was as cold as his eyes.

Carl chuckled. "I'm afraid you're a little late. We've eaten most of what we had. There's precious little left."

"So we'll take that." He pointed the gun at Carl. "Show us where it's at."

Again Carl chuckled lightly, as if enjoying some joke none of the rest of us knew. "It's where food normally is kept. In the kitchen, through those doors." He pointed at the double doors that led into the dining room and then the kitchen beyond. "I do hope you'll leave us just a little."

This time the leader laughed, a cold laugh that seemed to drop the temperature in the room ten degrees. "Not hardly." With a sharp nod, he indicated that two men should check out the kitchen.

As they disappeared toward the kitchen, another came from the south

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hall carrying a case of canned tuna. "Found this under some sheets in a closet. There's a bunch of stuff in there."

The leader turned to Carl. "Strange damn kitchen. Get up and take us to where you've hidden all the supplies." The leader motioned with the gun for Carl to stand.

"I'm afraid," Carl said, "that you are going to have to find what you can without my help."

"I don't think so," the guy said. "Not if you and your friends hope to see tomorrow."

Carl just shook his head. "I really don't —"

The guy swiveled suddenly and fired a burst of shots at James.

James seemed to explode up and off the couch. He smacked against the window, a look of surprise on his face. Then he dropped back down on the couch, leaving a smear of blood on the window. He stayed sitting for a fraction of a second, then tumbled off the couch onto the floor. I could hear the breath draining from him as the last echoes of the shots faded into the walls.

My mind shut off.

I had seen too much death, too many people dying, to stand for any more.

I could see Carl start for the murderer as I screamed "No!" and lunged for the man closest to me. My intention was to get his rifle. I had taught my son to stand up for what he thought was right. Fight if he had to. By God, I would at least go out of this world doing the same.

But my old legs failed me, and I didn't move anywhere near fast enough.

Not even close.

The guy turned before I was out of the chair. His rifle butt rushed at my face. I ducked enough to take the blow above my left eye.

I felt the instant pain and jarring from the blow as it knocked my head back. And I remember feeling incredibly angry at my old body for failing me when I needed it the most.

Then the world went black.

The major contributing factor of the almost complete annihilation of the world's elderly population was the loss of the will to live. In America a very large percentage of the elderly had lived full, rich lives. When sud-

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denly the world they had worked to build was destroyed, many simply gave up and died, or took a more direct approach and committed suicide.

Harold Burgett, Ph.D.
Who Really Died in the War, Daddy?
Concert Press, 2007

SOME MOVEMENT outside my room startled me. I stopped writing and listened. Someone was rummaging through the nurse's station, looking for who knew what. Probably drugs.

I glanced back down at the letter I had almost finished, then held it up in the light from the window to reread it.

Dear Johnny,

It's been twelve days since things went dark. Twelve long days. I'm writing you this in hopes that the world will somehow regain its sanity and put itself back together enough for you to come looking for me. I want you to know I tried to make it. Just as your mother and I taught you to never give up, I haven't either.

But I know that soon I will grow incredibly hungry. A mob from the houses below the nursing home broke past our wall of bodies three days ago and found most of our food. They killed two of my friends who tried to fight beside me. Barbara, the only nurse who had stayed with us, disappeared that day. I think they took her. I was knocked unconscious, but regretfully lived to face this hunger.

I stopped reading, took a deep breath, and tried to calm the anger that still boiled. I must have been unconscious the entire day and the next night. The sun was just coming up when I had finally come to. Half the muscles in my body ached, and my head hurt worse than I could ever remember it hurting.

Carl was dead, slumped in the chair, his body covered with blood, his face frozen in anger. I must have sat staring at him and James for hours before I finally managed to move. It was into the middle afternoon, after a cold shower, a raid on a case of tinned green beans James had hidden in the nurse's lounge, and six aspirin from a bottle still left in my medicine cabinet, that I finally got around to facing what little future I had left. I knew first, somehow, I had to take care of James and Carl. They had been

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my friends. They deserved better than rotting in the front room of a nursing home. There wasn't much I could do for them, but I could do something.

I found a wheelchair by the nurse's station, and after a good fifteen minutes of wrestling with Carl's body, got him sitting in it. Then I wheeled him back to his room, opened up his drapes, and left him facing out his window, looking over the grass and the houses below. It was the best I could do, and I apologized to him for not being able to do better.

It took me longer to get James off the floor and into a second wheelchair, but I managed. I found his pipe and stuck it in his dead fingers. I also left him in his room. As with all of us who had come to the nursing home to live our final days, James knew he would never escape his room alive. It seemed as good a resting place as any.

I glanced back at the letter to Johnny that I had been working on since yesterday. At times it seemed so pointless. But I had to leave him something, so I went back to reading.

I hope you will not think bad of me for ending this torture of waiting. My friend James, before he was killed, got some pills from Barbara. I have three in my sock just in case something happens. James said two would be more than enough, but, if need be, I plan to take all three. He said when I take them it will be painless, so don't worry about that. Just remember that I fought to what I consider the very end. You must continue to do the same.

"God, it smells in here," a voice said from down the hall. "You find anything?"

"Nope," another voice said. Both sounded young. Very, very young.

"You want to search the rooms?" the first voice said.

"For what? To look at dead bodies? Let's get out of here before I puke."

I could hear the two boys scrambling toward the front. The picture of Mrs. Hodges flying down the hill on her bed flashed into my head. Maybe that was the way I should go. I could take the pills, give my bed a push, and have a wild ride into the next world.

I laughed and glanced down at the end of my last letter to Johnny.

So now I leave here and go in search of you. This place has become a

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graveyard more so than it ever was when times were normal. I know leaving here is as good as killing myself, but there is no point in my remaining. I have little hope of making it all the way to Florida. What food I have will run out or be stolen far before then. And you know my legs will never carry me that far. But I plan on trying, just as I know you will try to get here.

I hope you make it, my son.

Maybe, with luck, we'll meet in the middle somewhere along the way.

With love, always.

I signed "Dad" and laid the letter on my pillow. If he got here, he'd see it. He would at least know I tried. That much I could leave him.

I made sure what little food I had was stuffed safely in my pockets and the small carry bag I had borrowed from James.

Then, with one last glance around my room, I picked up Carl's cane, shuffled out into the hall, and turned toward the front door.

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COMING SOON

Next month: A Kelly Freas cover for a very different and compelling John Morressy story titled "Timekeeper." Judith Moffett with a Christmas story called "I, Said the Cow" and Alan Brennert with a novelet, "Sea Change."

Soon: New stories from Ian Watson, David Brin, Bruce Sterling, Bradley Denton, Wayne Wightman and many others.

Use the coupon on page 161 to enter your own subscription or to send a holiday gift.

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This is the first of several superior stories we have on hand from Esther Friesner. Ms. Friesner has a Ph.D. and M.A. in Spanish from Yale and taught there before turning to full time writing. She has nine fantasy novels in print, most recently THE WATER-KING'S LAUGHTER (Avon). "Poe White Trash" is the funniest story we've read in many months and can be blamed, the author tells us, on the fact that she was born in the Deep South of Brooklyn.

Poe White Trash

By Esther M. Friesner

I HEAR BILLY BOB drive up to our place in that old pickup of his. Don't even have to lift the lino blind to tell. I know the cranky sound of that rust bucket he drives to heart. Also, he run over 'nother one of my dogs, and that makes some racket. Got old Loper this week, last week was Jimbo. Didn't even say he's sorry, and them's prime coon hounds. That's when I swore I'd kill him, man runs over his good buddy's dogs reg'lar, don't even offer to buy him a beer.

I come out on the front porch. Granny's a-rocking there, skinning possum, that weird milky eye of hers on me. Looks like a gahdamn vulture eye. Sometimes I'd like to chuck Granny over the edge, too, what with that old woman's eye on me and the crik-crik-crik of her rocker going on and on, just a-haunting me so bad. Bet I'd even hear it after she's dead and gone, maybe stuffed in that old army footlocker of mine, crik-crik-crik till I go plumb crazy. But I'm gonna kill her anyhow. Drinks up too gahdamn much beer for an old lady.

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Today's Billy Bob's day, though.

I see him coming down outa the cab of his pickup, a-smiling and a-smiling. Just pauses long enough to pry old Loper off the front grillwork 'fore he comes up to the house. "Wipe your feet, boy," Granny tells him. He kicks her in the nearside rocker and walks in the house whilst she's still a-spinning. Never did see a skint possum fly so far.

"Oughta choke that old chicken," he tells me.

"Studying on it," I say. "How 'bout them Razorbacks?"

I make us sandwiches — slab onion and mayonnaise, just the kind Billy Bob likes best. I even give him the last two slices of Wonder Bread. I eat mine offa that whole-grain trash Annabelle Lee got in the house. It's some stale, 'cause I allus swore I'd rather die'n eat bread what the grain's not even fully ground up fit for a Christian man. Annabelle Lee said whyn't I go die, then.

I miss Annabelle Lee. I purely do, sometimes. But Preacher'd say she's in a better place now. Funny, I never thought of our old cistern that way 'fore.

Billy Bob, he eats on that sandwich till there ain't enough left on his plate to feed a nit. Then he leans back in his chair and pats his belly through the overalls.

"New grill's gonna cost some," he says to me.

"What grill?"

"Truck grill. Grill what your hound ruint. You gonna split costs with me, boy. Ain't my fault you don't keep your animals proper, they go th'owin' theirself at a man's truck."

I nod, don't say nothing. I'm waiting on what's a-coming. My first wife, Luella May, she allus did used to get on my back 'bout how I was the triflin'est man. What's I waiting on? she allus did ask.

Then that gahdamn witchy black cat of hers commenced to yowling like he agreed with her. The old one-eyed sumbitch.

"Hey!" Billy Bob says, setting his chair down again. "Talkin' 'bout critters, whatever did come of that 'ere old black cat you used to keep on the place? Big bastard, one eye shot plumb to hell. Know for sure I didn't skoosh him. He be too big and mean for my truck."

"You're crazy, Billy Bob. That old cat be gone these many years."

"Jes' like Luella May, huh?" He gets this shit-eating grin on his face, like he knows sumpin'. Knows too gahdamn much as it is.

"Yeah," I say. "Jes' like Luella May." Have to speak up loud some,

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though. Old sumbitchin' cat still got a loud yowl on him, 'spite the genoowine stimulated knotty pine paneling I put up to cover over the fresh plaster and the hole in the wall and Luella May. Gonna have to look into that someday, get me maybe one of them G.I. Home Improvement loans.

Too much to do today.

I change the subject. "Thirsty?"

Billy Bob laughs. "When ain't a man thirsty? Gimme cold beer."

I make a big deal outa checkin' out the icebox. "Ain't nothin' in here 'ceptin Nehi, Billy Bob. You want orange or grape?"

Billy Bob, he rares outa his chair. "You mean to tell me you ain't got no gahdamn *beer*, boy? What kinda man is it don't got no beer on the place?"

I shrug some. "You know my ol' granny. Drinks arything ain't nailed down. Seems I recollect having hid a six-pack on her, though. Hog-on-Ice Lite. But that's down cellar."

"Say so? Hog-on-Ice Lite, you can't get that label no more. Where'd a pissant like you come by it?"

"Us pissants got ways." I smile at him, make him think there ain't no hard feelings.

Hell there ain't.

"I kin go down cellar, see if she's there, bring 'er up." I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. "Can't say as I'm certain she's still down there. Sure hope so. I got me a thirst on, too."

That fetches him. He gets up outa his chair like they's a ferret in his Fruit of the Looms. "Think I'll just come 'long with you, boy. Be a sin and a shame if that Hog-on-Ice Lite was to — y'know — *disappear* on you sommers 'tween down cellar and up here, now, wouldn't it?"

I shrug some more. "Come 'long, then."

I take Billy Bob down cellar. Ain't much to look at, our cellar, but she's big. Fulla old junk, too. Billy Bob near trips and busts his face 'gainst this spooky ol' ax my granddaddy left a-hanging down there, Lorry knows why. Least little shove sets her a-swinging back and forth, back and forth, like the whatchacallit 'side the clock upstairs. Lose us a lotta nosy neighbors that way, Granddaddy used to say. Had a good chuckle on him, he did. Taught me nigh ever'thing I know 'bout farming.

You can't beat bonemeal fertlizer for making things grow, and thassa fact. Wonder if he really did run off to Topeka like Granny said?

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Billy Bob, he's got good balance, else he'd mighta fell into that deep old hole right 'side Granddaddy's swinging ax. Be a pity did he. I got other plans for him.

Praise be, he jerks hisself back from the edge and shinnies round the pit, cussing up a storm. Gives me a punch inna shoulder, just to work off some his spite. Allus was doing stuff like that to me, him being so big and all. Heavy bones, I betcha. Lotta good meat on 'em, too.

Finally we get to the north end of the cellar, where this brickwork wall stands. She's kinda broke down, and there's a light burning t'other side of the gap. Billy Bob, he's so bone ig'rant, he doesn't think nothing of a light a-burning on its own way down here.

He justs asks where's the beer.

So I point him through the gap. He shoves me outa his way and bolts through the open wall like a man what reaches for the Sears catalog out to the two-holer and picks up sandpaper instead. You coulda hear the yell of joy he gives clear 'crost county. "*One* six-pack, boy? Shhe-*it*, there are purely twenty-seven sixes down here, 'long this one wall alone, and a whole heap more on t'other shelfs. All Hog-on-Ice Lite, too. You been holding out on your friends? Boys down to the Dew Drop Inn, they be mighty riled to hear it."

"'Spect they would. So you don't tell 'em, Billy Bob. You get youse'f a beer, come on outa there," I say.

That makes him laugh. Knowed it would. "Come outa here? With one lousy beer? You got a nerve on you!"

"O.K., so nab you a six-pack and come 'long."

He laughs some more. "Since when you know me to fill up on one six, boy? I ain't no pansy pissant like some beer-hogging folks I could mention. And since when you tell me what to do?"

"You can come back down, you want 'nother."

"And fall down that big mutha pit you got down here? You'd like that fine." I hear him scrape that old orange crate 'crost the floor — the orange crate I left down cellar deliberate. A man what's comfy, he drinks him more beer. She kinda creaks when he lowers his big old butt down onto her. I hear tell as Mrs. Billy Bob does the same. "I'm gonna do my drinkin' right down chere."

You just do that, Billy Bob, I think.

And he does. Gahdamn, I don't hear nothing for the first half hour 'cept

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the sound of pop-tops a-hissing and good beer a-chugging down Billy Bob's gullet. After time the chugging slows. He's singing old Merle Haggard songs. Trying to. It's a misery to hear what that man can do to a good song.

I start a-mixing the mortar.

Billy Bob, he's moved on to singing songs he makes up hisself 'fore he notices what I'm doing. He's in the middle of "*No Hablo* Marriage, Sweet Sennorita," when he sees how the gap's a-closing and the wall's a-going up and I'm a-laying on the bricks faster'n a cat fulla castor oil can dig his way through a turnip patch. Yeah, he sees alla that, and he sudden knows that he's seeing it all from the inside looking out — but not looking out for long, huh-uh. I figure I'm doing the world at large and the country-western musical industry specific a damn good turn, so I brick up quicker.

I hear the orange crate 'skreet 'nother time, then go crashing over, but Billy Bob don't make it to the wall. Drunker'n a weasel. He allus was the falling-down-drunk type. Think I didn't know it when I planned this? You don't stock that much Hog-on-Ice Lite 'thout you know it won't all go to waste.

Billy Bob starts off a-hollering, then he goes a-threatening me, then he turns all mushy and commences to bellering and weeping, but it ain't none any good. He even swears he'll stand up right on the pool table at the Dew Drop Inn, Sat'day night and tell the boy's he's sorry he called me a dickhead for claiming I saw Elvis pumping gas down to the Mobil station in Huntstown.

He makes a few more tries to reach the wall, but I don't have but to thunk him one with the trowel to send him tumbling back onto his side the hole. The light in there's burning low — just stuck some K mart batteries in the lantern, didn't see as how I'd want to waste money on Energizers or nothing. By the time I'm ready to set in the last brick, he's quiet and the light's nigh out. I kinda wonder if he's dropped dead of fear. That'd be a pity. Man buys all that Hog-on-Ice Lite, he 'spects to get some horror mileage.

But then, just as the last brick's a-going in, I hear this jingling sound. Something shiny glints on his side the wall. It's the keys to his pickup. He's offering 'em to me, I should let him go.

"In a pig's eye, Billy Bob," I tell him.

"But it's a fine truck, boy! *Gahdamn* fine truck!"

"Old Jimbo, he was a gahdamn fine coonhound."

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The jiggling stops when I say that. It's all quiet again. I got the last brick in my hand when I hear:

"Aw, shee-*it*, Montressor!"

I plumb hate that pansy furrin name what Gran saddled me with. I purely do.

"Yeah, Billy Bob," I say. "You said a mouthful."

I come up from down cellar after I clean up everything. Old Granny's still on the porch, a-rocking and a-rocking. She don't ask no questions 'bout where's Billy Bob. I admire her for that, figure maybe I won't wring her neck and stuff her in that old footlocker, after all. Don't do to treat kinfolks like that.

Granny, she don't know what I'm thinking. She got this here scrawny old black bird 'twixt her knees what she's plucking bal-headed. Feathers they's flying everywhere.

"What in hell is that?" I ask.

"That's your dinner, boy." Not many teeth to her grin.

"Aw, jeez, Granny. I ain't fixing to eat no crow." Making me do that, that was Billy Bob's job, and he's seen to.

Gran's milky old vulture eye homes in on me good, makes my flesh commence to creeping so's I sweat all over. "Shows all you know, boy. 'At ain't no crow. 'At there's a genoowinne gahdamn raven. An' thassa fact." Real sassy.

Well, I sure as hell didn't think it wasn't no gahdamn black chicken!

I purely do hate takin' sass, 'specially off no woman. Ain't nobody sasses me. Not Annabelle Lee, not Luella May, not Billy Bob, not nobody. Old Granny, she might've got away with it till yet, but I ain't got nothing else to 'stract me now, Billy Bob being all settled in comfy like he is. Granny and that gahdamn bird. . . .

Crow, raven, blackbird, who gives a rat's ass? Gran, she ain't never gonna sass me ary further 'bout no bird, no way, no how, huh-uh.

Nevermore.

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F&SF has published seven stories by Paul Di Filippo over the last several years, but "Little Worker" may be his strongest. It concerns the leader of a future North America and his remarkable bodyguard, and it's one different and disturbing story.

Little Worker

By Paul Di Filippo

LITTLE WORKER CAME awake instantly. Lying curled on the red-and-black-figured carpet before Mister Michael's bedroom door, she stretched her limbs beneath her plain beige sleeveless shift, then stood on her bare feet. Mister Michael, she could sense, was still asleep. Mister Michael deserved to sleep, for Mister Michael worked hard. Little Worker worked hard, too, but she never slept late in the mornings, for there was too much to be done. (If Mister Michael stayed put in his office today, Lfttle Worker would nap at his feet.) But in the mornings, Little Worker always awoke before Mister Michael. She always would. It was her way.

Little Worker appeared unwontedly reluctant to leave her nightly station. Something, this morning, did not smell right. She sniffed the air intently, nostrils twitching. The troublesome odor was nothing she could identify. It was new. This was not necessarily bad, but might be. The new smell emanated from behind Mister Michael's door. It was not a dangerous

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smell, so Little Worker could not bring herself to knock or otherwise disturb Mister Michael. He would be up and about soon enough, for Mister Michael had a busy schedule. Perhaps then the source of the new smell would be revealed. Perhaps not. In either case, Mister Michael would instruct her about anything she needed to know.

Little Worker tucked strands of her moderate-length stiff brown hair behind her ears. She brushed the wrinkles out of her shift. They disappeared swiftly from the dull utilitarian fabric. She curried the short fur on her face, and licked beneath her arms. Her morning grooming completed, she set out for the kitchen.

First Little Worker had to go down a long hall. The long hall had a veined marble floor, down the center of which ran the red and black carpet with its oriental design. The long hall had large mullioned windows in its stone walls. Some of these windows had panes of stained glass. Through the eastern windows came bright winter sunlight. When it passed through the colored panes, it made lozenges of various hues on the carpet. Little Worker admired these dapples, for they reminded her of dabs of jelly on toast. Little Worker liked jelly on toast. She would have some this morning. She usually had some every morning, except when she took an egg to add glossiness to her coat. Little Worker, with the aid of the food center, could cook whatever she wanted for herself. This was one of her privileges. Mister Michael himself had said, when first she came to live here, "Little Worker, you may order the food center to prepare whatever you want for yourself." This had made her proud. In the Training School, she had had to eat whatever the trainers set out for her. But Mister Michael trusted her.

The next door down the long hall from Mister Michael's belonged to the bedroom of Mister Michael's wife. Little Worker lifted her nose as she came abreast of the door, intent on passing without stopping. However, noises from beyond the door made her stop. The noises were thrashings and moanings and grunts. Little Worker suspected what the noises were, but curiosity impelled her to look anyway.

The handle of the door was shaped like a thick curled gold leaf. Above the handle was a security keypad. Below was an old-fashioned keyhole. Little Worker put one big hazel eye to the hole.

It was as Little Worker had suspected. Mister Michael's naked wife was draped belly-down over a green plush hassock, being covered by her latest andromorph, a scion of the Bull line. Little Worker could smell

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mixed male and female sweat and a sexual musk.

The sight disturbed Little Worker. Mister Michael's wife was not the kind of wife he deserved. Little Worker ceased her spying, and continued on toward the kitchen.

At the end of the long hall was a curving flight of wide marble stairs. Here the runner ended. The marble was cold beneath Little Worker's feet. She went down the stairs quickly.

On the ground floor, Little Worker first crossed a broad reception hall along the walls of which were ranged busts on plinths, potted plants, and gold-framed paintings. She passed through a huge salon used for formal affairs, then through Mister Michael's study, with its big walnut desk and shelves of books and wall-sized plasma screen. Several more chambers intervened before the kitchen, but finally Little Worker reached that chrome-and-tile room.

Most mornings, as now, the large kitchen was empty. On the mornings of those days when there were to be state dinners, the kitchen was bustling early with hired chefs, who prepared the more complex dishes that the food center could not handle. Little Worker disliked such interruptions of her normal schedule. However, this was not such a morning. The kitchen was empty.

Little Worker advanced to the food center.

"Food center, prepare me toast with jelly," she said.

"There is no more bread,' replied the food center.

No more bread. Little Worker was disconcerted. She had had her heart set on toast and jelly. What could have happened to the supply of bread? Yesterday there had been plenty of bread.

"What has happened to the bread?" asked Little Worker.

"Last night, Mister Michael's wife fed it all to the Bull andromorph. He ate three loaves. There were only three loaves. Thus there are no more."

Mister Michael's wife had fed all of Little Worker's toast to her Bull. It was the fault of Mister Michael's wife that there was no toast this morning for Little Worker.

"The bakery delivery occurs at ten o'clock this morning," offered the food center helpfully.

"I will be gone with Mister Michael by then. I will not be home at ten o'clock. I must eat something different." Little Worker paused to reflect. "I will have hot cereal with a spoon of jelly on it."

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"There is no jelly. The Bull ate that also. With peanut butter."

Little Worker tensed her fingers reflexively. Her morning, disturbed already by the new odor coming from Mister Michael's bedroom, was not getting better. The change in routine upset her. It felt like a morning when chefs came. But no chefs were here.

"I will have an egg, then," said Little Worker.

"There are eggs," said the food center.

"There is no jelly for an egg?" hopefully asked Little Worker one last time.

"There is no jelly even for an egg."

"Then I will have an egg alone."

Little Worker sat at a table with metal legs and white tile top. When her egg came, she ate it, licking the plate to get all the yolk. It would serve to make her fur glossy. But it did not taste as good as jelly.

When she was done, Little Worker ordered the food center to prepare and serve breakfast for Mister Michael and his wife in the South Dining Room. Then she walked through halls and storage rooms until she arrived at the South Dining Room.

Mister Michael was already there, seated at one end of a long polished table, reading a newspaper and sipping coffee.

"Good morning, Mister Michael," said Little Worker.

"Morning," said Mister Michael somewhat gruffly. Little Worker quivered inside. Mister Michael did not seem himself this morning. He worked too hard, thought Little Worker. He had too much on his mind. The state demanded too much of him. He should be better to himself.

Little Worker coiled up at Mister Michael's feet beside the table, where she could watch everything that happened.

Breakfast was served. Mister Michael's wife did not arrive on time. Mister Michael began to eat anyway. Only when the fine Canadian ham and scrambled eggs and poached fish were cold did she come through the door.

Mister Michael's wife was dressed for shopping. She wore an ivory jacket short in front but with long tails that hung to her knees in back, over a pale blue silk blouse and tulip-hemmed ivory skirt. She wore blue metallic stockings and creamy high heels. She smelled heavily of expensive perfume, which failed to conceal entirely from Little Worker's keen nose the aromas of her recent mating.

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Sitting gingerly, as if sore, Mister Michael's wife picked idly at the food set before her. Neither she nor Mister Michael spoke for some time. Finally, though, setting down his paper, which rustled loudly to Little Worker's ears, Mister Michael said, "There are some important people coming up today from Washington. They'll want to meet you."

"How very tedious. And what time would that be?"

Mister Michael seemed to be restraining his anger. "Around two."

"I'll try to be there."

Mister Michael's anger escaped. "Try! You'd damn well better be there. As my wife, you have certain official responsibilities, just as I do."

"No one elected me to be the prime minister's wife."

"You elected yourself when you married me. You can't pretend you didn't. You knew quite well that I might someday end up as prime minister. I told you so from the outset. God, what do I ask of you, other than to show up for a few ceremonial occasions? Do you imagine I've got it any easier? It's not a part-time job, governing a whole bloody continent."

"You wanted the job. I didn't."

Mister Michael folded his hands, as if afraid of what they might do. Little Worker's hands clenched in sympathy.

"Let's not argue, shall we? Please make every effort to be at the ministry by two."

"I'll simply rush through the stores, then."

"Good." Mister Michael looked down at Little Worker. "It's time to go. Would you please get my briefcase? I left it by the bed."

Little Worker quickly gained her feet, eager to please. "I'll get your briefcase. Where will you be?"

"Just inside the front door. Oh, have the car pull around also."

"I will have the car pull around," agreed Little Worker.

On the way to the garage, Little Worker considered the argument she had overheard. She reached the same conclusion she had arrived at while standing before Mister Michael's wife's bedroom door: Mister Michael's wife was not a good one for him.

In the garage, Little Worker confronted the sleek, low-slung car.

"Mister Michael wishes you to idle at the front entrance."

"I will exit the garage, after opening the door. I will proceed down the drive, through the gate, after opening that also, and around to the front entrance. There I will await further orders."

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"Good."

The car started its ceramic engine and opened the garage door. Little Worker left it. She took the back stairs to the second floor and approached Mister Michael's bedroom from a direction different from that by which she had gone earlier.

The door was ajar. Little Worker entered.

The room was not empty.

Lying languidly on the bed among the rumpled sheets was a naked gynomorph. When she heard Little Worker enter, she opened her eyes.

"Hello," said the gynomorph. "I am a hetaera, of the Lyrical line. Do you wish to hear me sing?"

Little Worker was stunned. "No. I do not wish to hear you sing. What are you doing here?"

"I am now owned by Mister Michael. He brought me here. Do you wish to know my pedigree?"

"No."

"I will recite it anyway. I am comprised of five species, with 3 percent being human. My skeletal structure is avian, ensuring a lightness and appealing fragility. I weigh only forty kilos. My musculature is feline, my skin is a derivative of chamois. My brain is based on that of a mink. I have a contractile index of ninety. My pheromones are tailored specifically to arouse Mister Michael."

The gynomorph moved her legs and arms luxuriously, and arched her back slightly, elevating her pubis. Little Worker stared furiously, her mind in turmoil.

"I am comprised of twelve species, with a full 10 percent being human," she finally countered.

"My measurements, in centimeters, are one hundred, forty, eighty. What are yours?"

Little Worker looked down at her stocky, compact, and muscled form beneath her shift. "I do not know my measurements," she said.

The gynomorph smiled, revealing delicate pointed teeth. She ran a tongue over her lips. Little Worker could hear it rasp.

"Well," said the hetaera, "I guess you don't know much, do you?"

"It seems not," said Little Worker.

Now they were at the office. The office was different from home: dif-

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ferent noises, different smells. There were no windows in Mister Michael's office, no blots of jelly-light on the tan carpet, into which Little Worker's garment nearly blended. At home, Little Worker could do pretty much as she pleased, as long as she was there should Mister Michael need her. At the office — and in other public places — she had to be more circumspect and diligent. Little Worker was on duty here, in a way that was more intense than behind the electrified fence and active sensors of the estate. Little Worker normally prided herself on her diligence. (Once, one of the men at the Training School had said: "Little Worker, you are the most diligent companion I've ever trained." The men of the School had been nice, in their stern way. But no one was like Mister Michael.)

Today, however, Little Worker's mind was not on her work.

Mister Michael's first afternoon appointment had been shown in. Little Worker lay quietly behind Mister Michael's big brown leather chair with the brass studs. Mister Michael was meeting with the people from Washington. Little Worker paid scant attention to them. They had been cleared by Security, and smelled harmless. Little Worker couldn't even see the visitors from her vantage. They were just a collection of mildly annoying voices, which interferred with her contemplation of the new and disturbing events at home.

When Little Worker and Mister Michael had gotten into the car, Little Worker had circumspectly sniffed Mister Michael to see if any of the hetaera's odors still clung to him. She was relieved to find that none did. Mister Michael must have washed. For a moment she felt heartened. But as the car accelerated down the front drive, picking up its entourage of armored outriders on cycles at the Security station on the periphery of the estate, Little Worker realized that her relief was wrong. Mister Michael might smell normal, but his attitude was disturbed. He was not his usual self.

Little Worker wished she could somehow make everything right for poor Mister Michael, who worked so hard and whose wife was so bad that he had to seek relief in the arms of that disturbing gynomorph.

Little Worker would do anything to make Mister Michael happy.

The visitors continued to talk. Little Worker was hungry. Mister Michael had worked straight through their regular lunch hour. She would have toast with jelly for her belated midday meal, the first chance she got. Surely the ministry's kitchens would be able to supply some. Perhaps she

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could convince the home food center — which was rather stupid — not to dispense any more bread or jelly to the Bull andromorph. It would be worth a try.

Little Worker was suddenly bored with her own problems, since no easy solutions presented themselves. She decided to listen to the conversation.

"— tell you that you can't ignore them," said a visitor. "The Sons of Dixie may seem like just another fringe group to you up here in Toronto, but back home they command a lot of sympathy — some of it from powerful folks."

The man had a funny way of speaking. He sounded emotional. Mister Michael, to the contrary, spoke calmly and in the proper way.

"I'm not proposing that we ignore them. All I said was that we cannot afford to cater to extremist elements in the Union. The whole political structure is still too fragile, too new. Naturally, for the first decade or so, there's bound to be a bit of confusion and uneasy integration, as people settle down to a new way of being governed. But we've had quite a bit of experience with our own separatist element over in Quebec, and the major lesson we've learned is that one must be firm. In fact, I intended to sound out you gentlemen on how your constituency would react to a ban on such groups as the Sons of Dixie."

There was shocked silence for a moment. Then one of the visitors spoke.

"Why, that's outrageous. It's — it's unconstitutional!"

"I'll have to remind you that the Union no longer functions under that document. New times call for new measures. Unless you can convince me there would be outright revolt, I believe I'm going to propose such a measure to Parliament. No group that advocates the overthrow of the Union — by violent or peaceful means — will be permitted to function."

Confused grumbles and mutters and chopped-off phrases issued from the visitors. Mister Michael let them babble for a moment, before cutting through their objections.

"Gentlemen, I'm afraid you'll have to consider it done. Let's turn to more important matters. The Brazilians are pushing us on the boundary negotiations. Do we want to let them north of the Rio Grande, or don't we?"

Little Worker tuned out the unimportant talk. She was more concerned with her delayed meal.

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At last Mister Michael, consulting his watch, said. "Well, enough of work. We have a few more days during your stay to discuss such things. I believe you expressed a desire to meet my charming wife. She should be here any moment."

Everyone waited. Little Worker shifted positions to ease a cramp in her right haunch. Mister Michael's wife never arrived.

When the visitors had been shown out with many apologies, Mister Michael returned to his seat. He was silent for a time. Then he banged his fist on the desk.

"Something has to be done about that woman," he said. "Something has to be done."

Little Worker silently agreed.

ONE DAY not long after this time, Little Worker found herself home alone.

This was highly unusual, for she was seldom separated from Mister Michael. In public or private, Little Worker was always by his side. Even when he traveled abroad, Little Worker went with him. (Little Worker had been to a lot of places with odd names, mostly other cities; aside from a few curious smells here and there, they all seemed alike.) But today Mister Michael was at the Doctor's, getting his anti-aging treatment. He had just started the treatments six months ago, when they became available. The location of the Doctor's clinic was secret, even from Little Worker. Mister Michael had explained to her that it was for her own protection, so that no one could capture her and force her to reveal where the clinic was. Little Worker had to smile at the thought of anyone capturing her. For one thing, no one ever paid any attention to her. Who would think she knew anything worth knowing? Little Worker felt it would have been all right for her to go with Mister Michael, but he wouldn't hear of it. It was just him and the car, and the car would have its short-term memory wiped clean after the trip.

As for Mister Michael's wife — Little Wonder didn't know where she was and didn't really wonder. After all the trouble she had caused, Little Worker couldn't have cared what happened to her.

All that mattered was that for the first time in six months — and only the second time since she had become Mister Michael's companion — she was without him.

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It made Little Worker very uneasy.

So Little Worker wandered through the big, empty house, searching for something to occupy her until Mister Michael should return.

Upstairs, a fleeting impression made her pause outside the door of the bedroom of Mister Michael's wife. Aromas of Bull seeped out to her. Impulsively, Little Worker tried the golden handle of the door. It turned without resistance, and the door opened. Little Worked entered.

The Bull was lying on a couch. He wore nothing but a spandex thong that held his large genitals as in a pouch. He was flipping the pages of a colored picture book. When he heard Little Worker enter, he laid the book on his hard-muscled stomach, pictures up. Little Worker could see that the pictures were of matings, illustrating various positions.

"Hello," said Bull. "Do you wish to have sex?"

"No, I do not wish to have sex. I am Little Worker. I do not have sex with anyone. I wish to talk."

"I can talk."

"Very good. Would you like something to eat while we talk?"

"Peanut butter is good."

Little Worker went to an intercom. "Food center?"

"Yes?"

"Please send a jar of peanut butter to the bedroom of Mister Michael's wife."

"With a spoon?"

Bull looked guilty, as if doing something wrong. "No spoon."

"No spoon," repeated Little Worker into the intercom.

When the peanut butter arrived, Bull greedily unscrewed the cap and, dipping blunt fingers in, began to eat. Little Worker watched with approval. She knew very well how nice it was to feast on one's favorite food.

"Do you enjoy making sex with Mister Michael's wife?"

Bull looked confused. "What do you mean? It is what I do. Sex is sex. Peanut butter is what I enjoy. Am I supposed to enjoy sex also?"

"I do not know. Perhaps you would enjoy it more with someone else."

"Someone else? I don't understand. You said you did not wish to have sex with me—"

Little Worker was suddenly inspired. "I am not the only one home."

"There is another in the house who desires sex?"

"Yes. Would you go to her?"

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"I am not supposed to leave this room—"

"You are supposed to provide sex when asked."

"That is true. You have stated a fact that contradicts the order not to leave the room. What am I to do?"

"I tell you that you may leave this room."

"Who are you again?"

"Little Worker, Mister Michael's companion."

"Then I suppose I must listen to you."

"Very good. Please come with me."

"Let me finish this peanut butter first — There. Show me where is the one who desires to have sex."

Little Worker led Bull out into the corridor, and up to Mister Michael's bedroom door, which was locked. However, Little Worker knew the code.

Inside, the lyrical gynomorph was found taking a tub. Amid the welter of sudsy bubbles in the large sunken tub, only her delicate face and one knee were visible.

When the gynomorph saw Bull, her eyes widened and her nostrils flared. Bull developed an immediate erection.

"You are the one who wishes to have sex," said Bull.

"It is my nature."

"Mine also. Is it convenient to have sex in the bath?"

"Yes, it is."

Bull tore off his thong.

Little Worker left the pair of 'morphs together.

Mister Michael's wife was the first to return home, five hours after Little Worker had arranged the illicit introduction. Soon she discovered Bull's absence, and his current whereabouts. Little Worker watched from the corridor as Mister Michael's wife attempted in vain to separate the two, who had ended up on the floor beside the bed, soaking the carpet with bathwater. Even striking at the pair with the sharp heel of her removed shoe failed to end the coupling. Eventually, special handlers had to be summoned. They, too, failed to halt the couple's pistoning.

"It's no use, miz; they've developed a destructive feedback loop. We'll have to take them in to be put down."

"Just do it, then!" shouted Mister Michael's wife. "It's disgusting!"

"Yes, miz."

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The 'morphs were loaded, still interlocked and bucking, into the back of a truck and driven off.

Little Worker was secretly happy.

But within days, Mister Michael's wife had procured a Stallion, while Mister Michael solaced himself with a Moon Moth.

LITTLE WORKER came awake instantly. She had not been sleeping well lately anyway. Her life had not been right since that long-ago morning of no toast and jelly. (One good thing about the Stallion was that he preferred oatmeal.) Mister Michael was always preoccupied and distant. At times, Little Worker almost resented having to be in constant attendance on him. When she had such feelings, she became violently sick, for the bad thoughts conflicted with her lessons from the Training School. Then she had to remind herself that Mister Michael and his welfare were all her reasons for being.

And now there was noise from downstairs. There should have been no noise from downstairs. It was the middle of the night. Oh yes, once there had been noise in the middle of the night from downstairs. Guards from the Security booth had come in to check on a possible breach of the perimeter. But it had been only a sensor failure. Perhaps there had been another sensor failure tonight. Little Worker would go see.

She got as far as the head of the marble stairs.

There she confronted four men. The men wore optical-distorting garments and infrared goggles. They carried light-rifles and had other weapons slung from their hips. They were not Security men.

"Well, well," said one intruder. "Lookee here. It's one o' them fuckin' cultivars. I'm gonna blow its head off."

"Don't get cocky, son," said a man who appeared to be their leader. "Just cuz we took out the local boys don't mean we can make all the noise we want. No shooting unless I say so. Anyway, maybe this thing can save us some time. You there — where's the Pee Em sleep?"

Little Worker was not afraid. She carefully considered the terrorists before replying.

"I will show you. But you must collect his wife, too, or she might summon help."

One terrorist whistled softly. Another said, "Shee-it, these 'vars ain't got no loyalty at-tall!"

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"O.K., Beautiful, lead on."

Little Worker conducted the men to the bedroom door behind which slept Mister Michael's wife. They slapped an illegal unscrambler to the lock. The device ran through all the possible combinations in three seconds, and they were in.

Mister Michael's wife lay sleeping in the arms of the Stallion. The men made various apparently honest grunts of shock, which awoke Mister Michael's wife and her bedmate.

Soon she and the Stallion had been herded into Mister Michael's room, where the prime minister was found in a similar situation with his new gynomorph.

One of the terrorists flicked on the lights, which seemed unnaturally bright at this forlorn hour. The men removed their goggles and shut off their suits, which had begun to hurt Little Worker's eyes. She was grateful.

The two human captives and their 'morphs stood shivering in the center of the room, the 'morphs naked and Mister Michael and his wife in robes. Three of the terrorists seemed calm, but one swiveled his gun nervously from side to side.

Little Worker curled unconcernedly at Mister Michael's feet. She knew that Mister Michael was trying to catch her eyes, but she ignored him.

"Who — who are you from?" at last demanded Mister Michael.

"Sons of Dixie, folks. We felt our point of view wasn't reaching the proper ears. So we're aimin' to change things. Ain't that right, boys?"

"You're — you're all wired on something."

"Mebbe so, boss. But that don't prevent us from shooting straight. 'Zact opposite, in fact. So let's just follow orders, if you don't want to get hurt."

"What do you intend?" asked Mister Michael's wife.

"We're taking you 'n' the Pee Em on a little vacation. You'll go free when the gummint listens to us and does somethin'."

A second terrorist spoke. "What about these friggin' 'vars?"

"Slag those sex toys," said the boss. "Make it quiet, though. But save the one that helped us — it might come in handy again."

One of the men unholstered a pistol. Before anyone could react, it had spat twice.

Gelatin capsules hit the 'morphs and burst, releasing lysis catalysts. In under a minute the two 'morphs were a single mingled puddle of thick

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slime, atop which for a minute floated the Moon Moths' tougher gemmed wings.

"O.K., folks—" began the leader.

Unnoticed, Little Worker had slyly extended an arm toward the bare ankle of Mister Michael's wife. Now she pricked it deeply with a razored claw.

Mister Michael's wife screamed.

The terrorist with unsteady nerves shot her through the eye.

Before the man's trigger finger could relax, or any of the others could tighten theirs, Little Worker moved.

The part of her inheritance that was 30 percent wolverine took over.

The four intruders soon lay dead with their throats torn out, soaking the carpet with their blood where once the Bull and Lyrical had coupled.

Little Worker calmly licked the blood from her lips. She really preferred the taste of jelly. Wetting her palms repeatedly with her tongue, she meticulously cleaned the fur on her face. When she was done, she turned toward Mister Michael.

He had collapsed across the body of his wife, and lay sobbing.

Little Worker gently approached. She touched him tenderly. He jumped.

"Mister Michael," said Little Worker, "everything is all right now.

"You and I are alone."

(from page 134)

warm tend to lose all the volatile materials and are made up primarily of silicates (rocky substances) and metals. That is true of the bodies of the inner Solar system: Mars, Earth, Moon, Venus and Mercury. Earth, however, is large enough to retain considerable water, fortunately.

So there you have it. With this essay, I will leave the Sun (though I may return to it eventually), and next month we will pass on to some other subject.

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Reg Bretnor's first story here since "Aunt's Flight" (July 1988) is an affecting tale about a twelve-year-old girl whose love for horses and antiques lead her to wonderful discovery.

The Cheval Glass

By Reginald Bretnor

MARIANNE REALLY FELL in love with horses when she was twelve. Of course, she had often been close enough to them to remember how they always smelled nice and horsey, and how fresh their breath was, and how silvery-soft their lips and noses felt when you fed them sugar—but that had been years and years ago, when she was just a little girl, before her mother died. In the spring and summer, they had spent whole weeks at Grandpa Pete's place in the hills behind Carmel. They'd called him Grandpa Pete to distinguish him from her father's father, whom for some reason they called Grandpa Beaudry, which was their last name. Grandpa Pete had had horses then, and once or twice he had lifted her to the pommel of his English saddle and taken her for a ride, sometimes even galloping a little way. But now he lived in an apartment in Monterey, and he no longer rode, because his doctor told him not to—he wouldn't even let him drive. Besides, they'd moved to Santa Cruz, so she saw him very seldom, and never without Doris. Never.

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Marianne knew, because Doris had explained it to her, that there were reasons why girls her age were sometimes crazy about horses, reasons connected with sex and growing up and all that stuff, but when she thought of horses, it was always about the quick alertness of their eyes and ears, and the wind of their running, and their streaming manes and tails. She had started going out to Beth Stubblefield's riding academy, where Beth let her pet the horses, and feed them grain, and watch the riders, some of whom were girls even younger than she was, but Beth would never let her ride because she didn't have permission.

Several times she had asked both Doris and her father, and Doris had always pursed her tight little mouth, which pouted like a baby's when she couldn't have her way, and made excuses like, you couldn't trust riding-stable horses, and why not wait till she was bigger, when it'd be easier for her to handle them? — which Marianne knew wasn't true.

Then one day her father asked her what she wanted for her birthday, and, without even thinking, she blurted out, "Daddy, I want a horse! I want my own horse. It won't be like Beth's horses. I'll take care of it, and make its coat shine, and feed it, and it'll *love* me!

Her father looked at her and laughed, and, to her astonishment, he said, "Say, why not? We've got room enough here, outside the city limits. All we'll have to do is turn part of the garage back into what it used to be when it was a barn."

Marianne didn't even know Doris had been listening till she heard her sharp, emphatic, "No! Absolutely *not*!"

Then her father said, rather hesitantly, that he couldn't see why the kid couldn't have a horse — they could afford it; and he and Doris started quarreling, and Marianne left the room in tears, Doris's words following her until she ran out of the front door. "My God, Dan, how many times do I have to tell you? I don't want her risking her neck. Horses are dangerous, and I don't want to be typed as the wicked stepmother — can't you understand that? Besides, it's she that Pete's leaving all his money to, remember that! Not that I give a damn about —"

She knew what had happened after that. Her father had shrugged and given in, just as he always did when Doris put her foot down. She never mentioned having her own horse again, even though she was sure Grandpa Pete would've bought her one if she'd asked him to. But she dreamed of having one, and of riding it, and of whispering secrets in its ear

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when they were alone in its stall.

It was about then, too, that she sort of fell in love with antiques and antique shops. There were several of them in Santa Cruz, and she took to dropping in, timidly at first, and peering at their treasures. They all spoke to her of the past, and of other people's lives and hopes and sorrows; and besides that, so many of them were really beautiful. She'd come in slowly, almost as though she were waiting to be asked, and look questioningly at the owner with her huge, dark eyes; and almost always she drew a smile, and some remark like, "Go ahead, little lady. Look all you want to."

When Doris found out about it, she was upset, though not as much as she'd been about the horse. She talked it over with her friend Jan Williger, whose husband was a psychiatrist.

"For Christ's sake, I can't figure out what's got into the brat," Doris said. "I've done my best to get her to act like a normal kid. I can't even get her to watch the tube! Last week I bought her two swell tickets to that soft-rock concert — believe me, they cost a bundle — and what did she do with them? She *gave* them to Karen Sousa's girl — Karen who cleans for me. Would you believe it? Told me she didn't like any kind of rock, and when I got mad and said, 'I guess you'd rather be in those damn old shops breathing dust and looking at a lot of awful junk?', she told me it wasn't junk, and they weren't dusty!"

Jan laughed at her. "Come off it, Dor," she said. "Look, I'll tell you what my Al would say, only he'd charge a hundred bucks an hour for saying it. He'd say she's trying to find her mother —"

"I've done my best to be a mother to her!" Doris broke in angrily.

"Sure. Sure you have. But it's not the same, and you know it. Why do you suppose you're still 'Doris' and not 'Mom'? Right? Anyhow, Al'd tell you she could be doing lots worse than prowling the antique shops. . . ."

After that, Doris had quit nagging her about it. But Marianne knew she wasn't really hunting for her mother, who after all *was* dead; and besides, she had her memories, the best of which were those indefinite ones of loving warmth, and the sweet, delicate scent her mother'd worn, and of her gentle voice, which, she told herself, made Doris's seem like a blue jay squawking.

Sometimes after school, and sometimes on a Saturday afternoon, she'd make the rounds of all the stores where she knew she was welcome even though she never bought anything, but more and more often she began

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going directly to Quevira's. The sign on the narrow window said, in dull gold, *Roald Quevira, Antiques*, and from the narrow entrance the store opened out to a really large space behind the small optometrist's shop next door. Always, Mr. Quevira was either sitting in his tall, carved Renaissance chair, looking like a Spanish grandee and reading, sometimes in a foreign language, or else arranging and rearranging the innumerable objects on his shelves and in his glass cases. He was an old man, but she knew he wasn't one of those dirty old men Doris was always warning her against. He always greeted her very gravely and courteously, and then let her wander by herself until she asked a question, perhaps about a miniature on ivory, or a Japanesse netsuke, or an ancient intaglio carved into chrysoprase. He always explained about them very carefully, and after a while she started coming in and simply sitting down and talking and listening to his stories.

He had a very slight accent, and spoke so formally, that sometimes she wondered if he could have been a prince or a duke or something in Europe. He told her about precious things that had come down through the centuries, and about collectors and collecting, and about artists, some of whom had starved to death, and the unscrupulous men of wealth and power who'd patronized them; and so many of his stories were tales of mystery and wonder that she wanted to listen for hours on end. But there was one thing in the shop that he would never show her. Nor would he speak of it when she questioned him, but always changed the subject. It stood in shadow at the very back, and it was covered with a faded black velvet hood, but she could see that it was tall, almost five feet tall, and that it hung between the two arms of a heavy black frame, a glowing black like burnished ebony. Its base was intricately carved, and at the top of each arm was a clutching hand, holding one of the bronze rods that supported it.

"Marianne Beaudry," he would say, "I have told you many things, yes? I have told you because I know that you love beauty. Most of my customers, most collectors — they do not value beauty. Think — see those Japanese prints there on the wall? They are perfect, and yes, very expensive. Two are by the first Hiroshige, the third by Utamaro. Yet when I was a boy, they would command only a few pounds apiece — imagine it! But were they not as beautiful then as they are today? Now suddenly — how do you say it? — they are the *in* thing, and monkeys with much

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money buy them so that all the little monkeys will admire them and talk about what big, smart monkeys they must be. So few of us see beauty! To most, if a thing costs much money, it is beautiful. If a famous expert praises it, it is beautiful — even if it is only three lines drawn across a canvas." Then he would sigh, and tell her another story to make his point. And Marianne, listening, would watch the sunbeams from the skylight move across the room toward the mysterious shrouded object.

One day, just when the light touched its dark base, she could not help asking him again. "Please, Mr. Quevira," she said. "Oh *please!*" she pointed at it. "Can't you at least tell me what it is?"

He smiled at her. "Marianne, Marianne! How inquisitive you are." He paused, thought a moment. "Yes, I will tell you what it is, but you are to tell no one else, because they would not believe. It is a cheval glass. Do you know what that is?"

"Cheval," she answered, "That's French for *horse.*" she giggled. "Does that mean it was made for horses to see themselves in?"

He laughed with her. "It was not made for that, but I suppose if a horse happened to be in one's bedroom, he could indeed see himself. But that is not what is important. It is a very old glass, Marianne, probably Italian, perhaps made in the days of Dante Alighieri. No one knows. Maybe it was made in Venice, where mirror making was for long a secret art. But those who sold it to me there — and they never would have sold it had they not been beggared by the war — told me that nowhere in the world was another like it. You see, it is not one glass but two, and between them they have but one silvering, or so it seems. From the beginning, men have believed mirrors could work magic, at least when magicians made them, and so they said it is with this one. One face of it, Marianne, shows you what you really are — and that is something most people would rather not confront. And the other side — ah, it reveals your heart's desire — your inmost wish. And that, too, is not for everyone. Most people see nothing in it, a blurred face, perhaps. They are those who cannot permit themselves to see. But for others, a few others, it can be disillusioning, or terrifying, or horrible. It can be, they say, a window into other worlds; and some have said it tries to draw you in, into itself — yes, like your English *Alice.* So I must keep it here in the shop —" He smiled. "— because my wife will not allow it in the house."

"I want to see it," Marianne whispered. "I want to know about myself. I

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do. And also, I want to see the other side." She returned his smile. "Perhaps I'll — perhaps I'll see a horse."

For a long minute he gazed into her eyes, into their depths, trying to read what there was there, and she gazed into his, seeing only kindness in them.

Finally, "Marianne Beaudry," he said, "I have become very fond of you. Perhaps I should not do this, but I think it will do no harm to let you see yourself."

"And — and you've looked into it?"

"I and my wife, too," he answered. "What we saw is not important, but it did not frighten us."

"Then can I — can I see the other side?"

He hesitated briefly. "Yes," he told her, getting to his feet. "Yes, but for an instant only — no more."

He beckoned, and she followed him.

"Stand there," he said — and whipped the cover off.

For a moment, disappointed, she thought, *"It's just a mirror! Gee, that's all it is."*

Then suddenly she saw that in it, her reflection did not show her as she was — young, still unripened — but as she could be, and with a gasp she realized that great beauty could be hers, and happiness, and a deep tranquillity.

She heard Mr. Quevira breathe out suddenly. Quickly, he swung the mirror round on its bronze axles.

She looked. She saw nothing there except a vaguely glowing bluish mistiness. Then suddenly it cleared and there before her was a vast green meadow under a blue, clear blue sky — and in the meadow was a horse, a horse more handsome than any she'd ever seen, full of fire and pride and the delight of being alive. An instant? Later she thought it was for half an instant only before Mr. Quevira dropped the cover down and she again faced nothing but worn black velvet.

"*Oh!*" she cried. "Oh, Mr. Quevira, it *is* another world!"

"Now you have seen your horse," he said very softly. "Marianne, try to be content."

But Marianne, who never had been happier, knew that never again could she be content with the world she lived in, where even her father seemed so changed, and there was Doris, and Grandpa Pete off in

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Monterey, and the black shroud hiding her heart's desire.

DURING THE next fortnight, Doris noticed that she seemed even more abstracted than she had been. She even brought home a note from her teacher of French, a subject she'd always enjoyed and taken an active interest in. Marianne's work, her teacher said, had slumped badly — could there be something wrong? Doris tried talking to her, but the note of exasperation in Doris's voice made Marianne withdraw even further into herself. As often as she could, she wandered down to Mr. Quevira's shop and listened to his stories and asked him questions and stole glances at the mirror. But she never mentioned it until she'd made up her mind what to do. Then, one afternoon after she'd already been there half an hour, she leaned forward and, almost whispering, said, "Mr. Quevira, if — if I could get my grandfather to buy that cheval glass, would you sell it to me? I mean, that is, would you sell it to him?"

He waited a long time before replying. Then, "Yes," he said. "Yes, if your grandfather will do this, I shall sell it to you. We need not think about its market value. I want you to have it, so I will sell it to you — to your grandfather — for what it cost me. That is not quite five hundred dollars in our money."

Marianne jumped up and threw her arms around him there in his tall, carved chair, and kissed his cheek. "I'll write to him!" she cried. "I'll get him to send the money straight to you. I know he will!"

She dashed out, made her way home as fast as possible, locked herself in her room.

Dear Granpa Pete, (she wrote)

I've found something I want more than anything in the whole entire world!! more even than a horse. Its a great big mirror. The man in the antique store says its called a cheval glass, which means horse in French, cheval does I mean. Its awful expensive. Granpa, I'm ashamed even asking for it. But its real old, really! Mr. Quevira — that's the antique man — says so, and he's wonderful.

Though her grandfather had sympathized with her about the horse, he had always carefully refrained from interfering with Doris's decisions. But certainly, he told himself, there could be no objection to her having

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her own big mirror, not on account of safety, anyhow. He chuckled, and phoned the shop, getting first Mrs. Quevira, then her husband.

"I have some knowledge of antiques," he told them. "My field, before I retired, was Medieval and Renaissance European history — taught it for years — and I know that good antiques are a far better investment than money in the bank." They understood at once that he spoke their language, and Mr. Quevira's description of the mirror was exact and technical. He said nothing of its extraordinary properties. "I am selling it for this price," he said, "because it will make Marianne happy, and that is what she needs."

"I know," her grandfather replied, accepting their assurances at face value. "It's very kind of you. Next time I'm in Santa Cruz, I'll drop in. I'd like to meet you."

Within minutes he'd written the check, signed it *Peter S. Pendleton,* sealed and stamped the envelope. Then he phoned and told the Beaudrys what he'd done.

Marianne's father received the news with his accustomed apathy; Doris, in sullen silence. But Marianne couldn't wait to call Mr. Quevira and tell him. It didn't even bother her when Doris was horrid to her all through supper and all evening. Doris always resented anything Grandpa Pete did for her.

Doris called Jan next morning to complain about it. "What does a kid that age need with a great big mirror, for God's sake?" she said. "You think she's gone and got herself some crazy kind of complex?"

Jan laughed. "Dor, don't you remember when you were just starting to fill out? When you couldn't wait for your breasts to show so you could get fitted for your first bra? Didn't you get a kick out of looking yourself over? Anyhow, isn't it a lot easier on you than a stupid horse'd be?"

The next day was Saturday, and Mr. Quevira phoned right after breakfast. Would it be all right if he sent the mirror up around eleven o'clock?

Doris asked him whether the old man's check had come, and he replied that he wasn't worried. Then she told him she and Dan had an important luncheon date, but that Marianne would be home, and to tell the men to be careful to wipe their feet and not scratch anything getting it upstairs.

Right at eleven o'clock, a truck pulled up in front, the bell rang, and two moving men began unpacking the cheval glass, swaddled in movers'

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quilts and lashed down like a lifeboat. Karen Sousa was there, sweeping and vacuuming and dusting. When finally they brought it in, straining under its weight, she watched them carry it upstairs. "Hey, Marianne!" said Karen. "Looks like you really got yourself something there. Maybe when they get it all set up, I'll come up and see how beautiful I am." She chuckled.

"Maybe," said Marianne, running up the stairs after them.

She showed them where her room was, and where she wanted it, in the light from the south windows. "No, no," she said, when one of them started to lift the cover. "I'll do that."

Impatiently, she thanked them, almost hustled them to the bedroom door, locked it, even shot its small brass bolt.

Slowly, her heart pounding, she lifted the worn black velvet from it and dropped it to the floor.

Instantly, the coming years fell away, and she saw herself as she now knew she would be, and for a few minutes she simply stood there, drinking in the joy of it. Then, almost apprehensively, she reversed the mirror. It was brilliantly blue and cloudy, and to her it seemed vibrantly alive. She waited tensely while the mist disappeared.

Abruptly, there was the meadow, just as she had first seen it in the shop. The horse, too, was there, but now it was much, much closer. It was coming toward her. She could see its every detail, its small, bold hooves, its flowing silver mane and tail, its gleaming silver coat. Its broad forehead and great eyes told her of its intelligence. Suddenly it saw her, paused to toss its head and paw the earth, and snort in mock ferocity. Then, neck outstretched, it came to her; and, holding out her hand, she went to it, and joyously she felt the cheval glass's gentle pull as it drew her through into that other, kinder world to which it was the gate.

Half an hour later, Karen Sousa took her break. She went up to Marianne's room and tried the door. She knocked, and knocked again. She called out, "Hey, Marianne! Come on, let me in. I wanna take a look at *me*."

When there was no answer, she finally went back downstairs, mumbling about a selfish little bitch wouldn't even give anybody else a peek, and she went about her chores again.

She was still at them at three o'clock, when Doris and Marianne's father came back from lunch.

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"Well, did they get the thing upstairs all right?" asked Doris as soon as she was through the door.

"Yeah," Karen answered. "Haven't seen her since."

"Well, I guess we'll go up and see what she's saddled us with this time," said Doris.

"Hope you have better luck than me," Karen grumbled.

They went up; they tried the door; they knocked. Then, for several minutes, they demanded, pleaded, beat on the door.

"What the hell's wrong?" Dan Beaudry said. "She can't be sleeping after all our racket. Think something's happened to her?"

"In her own *bedroom*? Come on! She's playing games."

A quarter hour more went by before he went outside, got a ladder out of the garage, and climbed up to the window. It was latched, and the room was empty. He broke the glass, climbed in. He searched the closet, looked beneath the bed. Suddenly chilled, he unlocked the door.

"Sh-she's *gone!*" he stammered. "She's j-just not here! She had the door locked and bolted, and every window latched! Wh-what's going *on*?"

"She's playing tricks, the little smart-ass!" Doris pushed past him, searched the room herself. She came up to the mirror, frowned at it, reversed it, looked at her reflection. "Crap!" she said. "They've got better ones at Sears."

"I'll go with that. Give it another turn. See if that's any better."

She did. The mirror's second face confronted them. "Heck," he said, "I don't see anything, not really. Looks like maybe the silver's wearing off."

"How can you *say* that?" Doris screamed. "*Look at it!* It's like a goddamn freak-show mirror. Look what it's done to you, to both of us!"

She seized the shroud. Roughly, she pulled it down, hiding what she saw.

"Just wait until I catch her!" she yelled. "It felt like the goddamn thing was trying to suck me in! You and your damn daughter!"

They did not call the police until late the next day, after they'd phoned all the neighbors and everyone they could think of, and at first the police and the reporters wanted to make much of it as a "locked-room mystery"; but luckily, Jan's Al was there, and he explained how the only way people could get out of a locked room was the way stage magicians did it, and if they knew how, then it was simple. She probably knew a boy who did

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magic tricks.

Temporarily, at least, it helped them rationalize the unbelievable and evade their guilt, and they took refuge in its falsehood.

"Don't worry; she'll show up," Doris said after the first turmoil had died down, "but let me tell you — before she's even back, I want that mirror out of here, out of this house!"

"What'll we do with it?"

"Well, we won't give it to the Salvation Army. We might as well sell it back to that dealer who palmed it off on Pete."

Marianne's grandfather read about her disappearance two days later in the Monterey paper — when he phoned, Dan Beaudry explained that they just hadn't wanted to worry him, they'd been so concerned themselves — and he came to Santa Cruz immediately by cab. Grudgingly, Doris offered to put him up, but he said he'd already booked into a hotel. They offered him all the insincerities common on such occasions, and he, knowing them, was coldly courteous. He took the cab, which had been waiting at the door, straight to the antique store.

The shrouded mirror was already there, and both Queviras welcomed him, Mrs. Quevira a small, round Queen Victoria of a woman, quiet and affable.

"Of course you have come about Marianne," Quevira said.

"Of course. Mr. Quevira, I love my granddaughter. I love her very much. I have the feeling that strange things have been happening. Can you tell me anything about her?"

"Yes," Quevira said; and they talked together for a long time, about Marianne, what she had told him, and what she lacked and needed. Then Quevira told him the whole story of the cheval glass, and how both he and his wife had looked into it and knew that it was true.

Finally, he looked at his visitor. Peter Pendleton was still tall, still straight but his face was gray and haggard, and they could see how the new stress and sadness was tearing him.

"I think," Quevira said very gently, "that perhaps you should look into this cheval glass yourself."

Pendleton rose with an effort. "Yes," he said.

Slowly, they walked over to the miror. Slowly, Quevira removed the velvet cover.

For a few moments, Pendleton looked into it. "It's very flattering," he said.

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"No, it is simply truthful. And now the other side?"

"Yes."

Quevira reversed the glass, and Pendleton saw that it was clouded over; then suddenly, as it had done for Marianne, it cleared.

"Now," said Quevira, "it shows your heart's desire."

There was the vast green meadow, and across it half a dozen boys and girls were riding bareback, riding and laughing, singing and riding in the rich sunlight, in that glorious timelessness when one says farewell to childhood and revels in one's newfound youth. Deep in the background, on low, wooded foothills, stood a few serene, unobtrusive houses.

The horses trotted closer, closer — and Pendleton abruptly recognized his granddaughter; and she, him. She cried out, waved.

And at that point he felt the mirror drawing him, and knew that he, too, could join them.

Quickly, he stepped back, waving only once.

"No," he said to the Queviras. "No, it would not be fair."

And with his joy he thanked them.

"Is nothing sacred?"

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Eric Wolf writes: "Born in 1947 and raised in West Virginia, I began writing at nine. I got a B.A. in English, became a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War and, as a result, a Registered Nurse. I now live in Santa Fe and have worked as a nurse in a variety of settings." Mr. Wolf's first fiction sale takes place in a hospital and involves a dying woman, but it is not at all a grim or downbeat story.

The Wound That Would Not Be Healed

By Eric Carl Wolf

ERMA LIES ON her artificial sheepskin staring at the hospital wall, which glows with a pearly gray translucence. Briefly, she does not notice the pain in her hip, but it will be there when she looks for it again, a harsh, penetrating ache that reaches up inside her and seems to be spreading down her leg.

As she peers into the hazy uncertainty of the wall, the past emerges: the hills above the ranch, incandescent with early-morning sun. The hills are steep and . . . it must be autumn, for masses of rusty red cling to the slopes where the oak groves belong, above them the tall, dark spikes of ponderosa. As the hills move closer, Erma sees a rotten log that has fallen and broken across the face of the hillside. Pine needles are heaped thickly against it, and tender sprouts of kinnikinnick and hollygrape thrust up from the mulch of rotten wood and needles.

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Erma scans more intently, looking for the cabin she knows must be there — the one she lived in as a child with her drunken father and her silent mother. The more she focuses her gaze, the clearer the hospital wall can be seen. The past recedes. She sighs and, with the creeping daylight in the room, gives up the images of those times before wheelchairs and hospitals.

Her twisted, nearly useless fingers fumble for the call button and punch feebly at it. With effort, she depresses it, lighting a tiny button of a light, she is told, at the desk down the hall.

The night nurse approaches, her steps soft and regular: *tup, tup, tup....* By the gait, Erma knows it is the nurse with the musical voice.

"Yes, Erma?" the musical nurse warbles, coming into the room. Her voice always sings like that. It is as if she cannot speak, as if she is a fugitive from an aviary.

"Turn over," Erma croaks out with difficulty, reluctant as ever to form a sentence. To voice her need thus, as a command, helps her forget her helplessness.

"Of course, Erma," the nurse trills, rearranging the blanket and sheet, the pillows, the sheepskin, lifting and moving Erma's tiny, shriveled body, carefully adjusting the call button and hankie box — the one hundred tiny gestures that she uses to show herself attentive and caring. "Looks like it'll be hot today," she remarks cheerfully, attempting to start a conversation.

"Yes."

"I just heard on the radio that they've taken another hostage in Lebanon."

"Oh my," Erma says, unconcerned.

"And let's take a look at your abscess," the nurse goes on, quickly removing a bandage.

Erma flinches as the tape is pulled away, realizing that the remarks about the war and weather had been a disguise of the nurse's true intentions. "Ow," Erma says, the tone and volume of her voice no more expressive than before.

The musical nurse paws at Erma's hip. Erma feels every movement with needle-like intensity, knows precisely where the nurse 's invasive, probing fingers are touching her, though she cannot turn her neck far enough to see. Erma has not seen her hip in five years.

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"Hmmm," the nurse coos gently, like a mother bird over her nestlings. It is an ominous coo. It means the abscess has gotten no better, no worse. Erma grunts a little as the nurse pushes against the thigh. "Well, why don't we irrigate it again?" the nurse asks rhetorically, already beginning to set up for the procedure.

"All right," Erma says listlessly, knowing what is to come next. The nurse will irrigate the wound, forcing the pus out. She will use a rubber tube that burns like a hot branding iron. She will turn a heat lamp on the exposed tissue and aim a blast of oxygen on the wound opening. The heat and oxygen will feel like sandblasting, and several times Erma will ask to have them discontinued before the nurse will finally agree to take them away.

Erma cranks her neck around just enough to glimpse the wall, as if pleading for the pleasant, cool vision of moments before. The sun has risen, however, irradiating the wall with hot pink-orange, the silhouette of a tree flung across it. Erma sighs again.

She hates the day with the treatments, the numberless hospital personnel, the glare of sunlight at the window. At night she can sink into the darkness, find a pleasant dream and lose herself. The pain vanishes into a cavernous distance, and she is free. In the daytime the noise and light, the impingement of strangers upon her, drive against the pain like a hammer working at a nail.

Erma glances up at the religious image over the doorway, an emblem of loneliness and pain, a man hanging in front of all the world to be stared at and remarked about, his pain a ribbon of blood trickling out slowly, decorating the world with death.

It is midmorning. Erma has had her bath, and the linen has been changed. She has had her breakfast, during which the daytime nurse, a short, muscular man with a beard, sat her on the side of the bed.

Now Erma watches, "The Guiding Light." Claire is trying to make Fletcher understand how she came to be pregnant by Dr. Bauer. In the hallway, Erma hears Dr. Goring as he goes from room to room to make his rounds. He pauses outside her door briefly, speaking in a low tone with the day nurse. They speak low enough that Erma catches only a random phrase: ". . . intractable . . . get another wound culture . . . lay it on the line with her. . . ."

Erma sighs again, and Dr. Goring enters the room. "Hello, Erma!" he

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calls brightly to her, reaching as always to turn off the volume on her television control.

Claire's tear-filled eyes plead from the screen as her lips silently mouth the words, asking Fletcher to forgive her.

Dr. Goring sits down on the edge of the bed, jarring Erma's sore leg. "How's the physical therapy going?" he asks.

"You mean those whirlpool baths," she states, managing to put a note of accusation in her wheezing monotone.

"Yes, uh-huh. The whirlpools."

"Well . . . they hurt. . . ." Her eyes flicker toward the television screen.

"But we turned the water temperature down . . .," Dr. Goring begins. He does not finish. There is silence for a moment. Erma looks him in the eye only fleetingly. He regards her almost as accusingly as she feels toward him. "This is an important treatment, Erma," he says, ". . . if we're going to heal that hip."

"I know," she says. "It just hurts; that's all. I don't want it."

He takes a deep breath, launches into his speech for the day. It is shorter than usual, and to the point, and Erma does not have as many chances to check on "The Guiding Light." Fortunately, a special bulletin has intervened. She can see at a glimpse that it is news about the flooding in Mississippi.

". . . just going to have to realize," Dr. Goring is saying, his eyes on his hands, ". . . that you are not healing as rapidly as we'd like. In fact . . .," he takes a cautious breath, ". . . you're not healing at all. Now you either have to go along with the treatments. . . ." The news bulletin has blinked off, to be replaced by a pantyhose ad. Erma has never worn pantyhose. By the time they came on the market, she'd been in a wheelchair for ten years. ". . . better off at home. We could arrange for home care for you, but it would mean . . . well . . . calling it quits with trying to get the best of this thing."

Finishing, Dr. Goring looks up from his hands. Erma meets his eyes but looks away quickly. She knows what he means. The wound, he is saying, has become stronger than she is, stronger than he is, stronger than the painful treatments they have tried. Perhaps, she considers, it has become stronger than Jesus, who survived death to hang on the wall of her hospital room.

Erma's eyes flicker to the television. Fletcher is talking to Ed Bauer, but she cannot hear the conversation.

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"Well," she scratches out, "if it's time for me to go, then maybe I *should* go home." She hears the words slip out and die in the still air of the room.

Dr. Goring seems relieved. "I'd like to encourage you to stay and take the whirlpools, gain strength and have surgery," he says earnestly, "but it's your decision, Erma. Why don't you take the weekend to think about it?" He looks at her questioningly.

Fine," she says, but they both know she will not change her mind. They are both relieved that the battle of wills is over.

Dr. Goring continues to talk for a moment, but Erma is not really listening to him, and he leaves. Erma turns her eyes to the television, but realizes in annoyance that Dr. Goring has moved her control beyond reach. She can neither call a nurse nor turn up the volume on her television. She determines to call out for help, but the day nurse comes in almost at once.

"My TV thing," she says to him irritably. He hands her the control without speaking. He is too quiet, and Erma does not like him. Her floppy, gnarled fingers paw the control into exactly the right spot, and she turns the volume up.

". . . not the way you think it was," Ed is saying, but Fletcher is angrily storming out of the room. Organ music fades into another commercial.

"It's time to irrigate your wound, Erma," the nurse says.

Erma closes her eyes and purses her lips. She can easily remember the pain. "Wait." She has been through this argument with him many times, however, and he is ready for her. "If this is the only treatment you're going to have from now on, it's even more important than before," he tells her. "If we don't do this, the infection will spread, and you'll feel much worse than you do now."

"Oh, all right," Erma sighs. She shuts her eyes to screen out the daytime while he prepares for the treatment. She longs for the night, the silence, the floating dreams, and in her longing she shuts out the television, the sounds of the nurse moving around her room. As she pushes all this away from her, she comes closer to the wound, feels its painful, powerful presence that dominates her life. Suddenly, with wild hope, she wonders if the wound is strong enough to overcome the pain. It has overcome everything else, she knows. Losing herself further into her private silence and darkness, Erma clings to the wound's power, lets it force the pain, drive it away from her into the endless silence.

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"There! That wasn't so bad, was it?" the nurse's voice impinges on her. She understands that the irrigation is over, and she has felt nothing.

"No," she whispers, and notices that he has turned her and changed the bed sheets under her as well. She can no longer see the television, though she does not mind. Instead of the pain she has always felt after a treatment, Erma feels a gradual coolness, a sort of numbing, cottony softness begin to radiate from the area. She frowns, alone in her thought after the nurse leaves the room. Has the wound really taken away the pain for her? It seems as if it has withdrawn its presence form her, a life-like presence that she has lived with for so long that it has become like a companion. Frightened, she wonders if the wound no longer needs her, if it has deserted her with the pain, or if her life will end abruptly now that she does not have the pain to sustain her.

She reaches back with her hand cautiously, stretching the shriveled muscles in her arm, till the tips of her fingers touch the bandage.

IN THE darkness, Erma floats in the peace that she has felt since the wound took away her pain. It has been like a new life. Gradually she has stopped fearing what has happened, and has wanted only to enjoy the sensation, nothing more. She expected that the evening nurse would find something amiss, but the nurse went about treating the wound in the usual way, turning the lamp on it when finished, and hardly glanced at it. As Erma lied here now, disbelieving the suddenness of the relief, the evening nurse finishes up her notes: "Irrigation performed without difficulty. Patient has much less pain. However, patient is withdrawn, has not watched TV all this evening."

The evening nurse reports to the night nurse and goes home. She forgets all about the hospital at once. Her husband, an insurance adjuster, has gone to Mississippi; the worry gnaws at her like the infection in Erma's hip.

The night nurse makes rounds and, tiptoeing into Erma's room, listens for a moment to her breathing. Erma, hearing her and knowing it is the musical nurse, says, "Hello there!"

"Did I wake you, Erma?" sings the songbird in the nurse's throat.

"No, I was just lying here thinking."

"What are you thinking about?"

"Oh, nothing much. Just about when I was younger."

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The night nurse sits on the edge of the bed, curious. Erma has never talked so much. "What do you remember?"

"Oh, I was thinking about the horses. My dad, he had quite a few of them."

"What did he do with them?"

"Oh, he bred them for racing. I used to help him feed them."

"Did you like that?"

Erma chuckles dryly in the dark. "That depends if my dad was drunk or sober, I guess."

The night nurse has never heard even this much laughter from Erma, sad though it is, and she stays to hear more. Twenty minutes later, realizing she has neglected her other patients, fascinated by Erma's stories, she excuses herself and hurries away.

The safe, cushioning hours pass by, one after another, and Erma releases herself to the kindness the wound has bestowed on her. The walls loom like soft gray guardians around her, patient and caring. She knows the wound is there, that it has not deserted her, and yet it is keeping back the pain.

Dawn comes. Erma has dozed, and wakes with a start to see her mother hovering before her in the milky light. "Mother!" Erma says, surprised. Her mother does not speak, simply looks at Erma with silent, wondering eyes, and at length the light lifts enough that Erma can see, behind her mother, her father standing with a glower on his face and a willow switch in his hand.

The vision is shattered abruptly when the night nurse returns. "Time for your wound irrigation," she announces, and turns on the light, pushing back the magic of the night.

The procedure is much like the last two times, painless. The entire hip is gloriously numb and cool, and now the numbness is spreading like a cool fountain of creamy salve down her leg. The night nurse stares long at the wound as she finishes.

"What's the matter?"

"Well, I'm not sure if anything is. There's been some change in the abscess."

Erma catches her breath, afraid she will be found out, that they will learn what has happened and make it stop, make her take back the pain. Her heart beats uncontrolledly.

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The night nurse warbles softly to herself a moment, then says, "There's a sort of ring . . . *glowing* around the opening in your hip. It's quite . . . strange."

"Glowing?" Erma asks in a croaking whisper, but the night nurse does not hear her. She is aiming the lamp and the oxygen at the mouth of the abscess as if trying to force it back into Erma's body. She hurries out of the room afraid; uncertain, musical thoughts flit like agitated birds among the boughs of her mind. Erma heaves deep breaths as the wild thumping of her heart returns to normal. She is both relieved and afraid, relieved that there is no pain, afraid of what it means that her wound has begun to glow.

It is Saturday, and Dr. Goring does not make his rounds. The day is peaceful. Erma lies in bed watching the changing patterns of sunlight in the leaves of the tree outside. The man nurse cleanses her wound and, when done, whisks her into a wheelchair and pushes her through a maze of hospital corridors to the courtyard. Here she sits in the sun for a while, and he sits beside her. Both of them are silent. Erma's sunken eyes watch the plants along the wall, ignoring the other patients who sit here and there about her. The nurse attempts conversation, but he is awkward at it and soon gives up. She understands that he is a silent person because he is uncomfortable talking, and she feels a little sorry for him.

On Sunday morning he sits her on the edge of the bed, where she slowly forces bits of her breakfast onto a spoon and from it into her mouth. Her dentures, like clumsy tools, make regular, difficult chops at the food and gradually grind it into a paste that can be swallowed. For the first time in months, she enjoys the taste of her food.

While she is eating, Erma watches a news program. The floods in Mississippi are being covered in detail. Hundreds of people are dead. It occurs to Erma that other people recently have suffered worse pain than her own. She thinks sadly of the dead and their lonely survivors.

The bearded man nurse comes and sits by the bed. "Would you like to go to the courtyard today?" he asks.

"Yes," she says, surprised at herself.

"Good," he says. "It will help you think about something besides your pain."

"That's true," she answers noncommittally.

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He takes her to the courtyard, and she watches the other patients who are brought there, some of them in obvious discomfort, some with disfigurations, one who is blind. There is a young boy whose bandages swathe his chest and the stump of a leg. He despondently practices on new crutches, a crisp, cheerful nurse encouraging his efforts.

Erma watches them all intently, and when her nurse offers to return her to her room, she declines. "No, let me stay here a little longer. The sun feels good." He goes away, leaving her to think about the anesthetic foreignness that has invaded her leg. It now reaches nearly to the toes; and inside of her, she senses its cool, satisfying presence.

On Sunday evening, Erma decides to watch "Wild Kingdom," but as she pushes the channel selector, she comes across a program on the war in Lebanon. To her own surprise, she continues to watch. When the evening nurse comes in, she looks briefly at the program, then at Erma. There is a pair of spiderlike tears clinging cautiously to the corners of Erma's eyes, studying the wrinkles on her face, choosing a route.

The nurse does not wish to think about the war. She begins to talk loudly, and cleans Erma's abscess with an unusual vigor. Her furor abates as she contemplates the wound. At the finish, she is frankly upset as much about the wound as the war. The opalescent tissue hasn't got the dead white of necrosis, nor the mottle of granulation. Most unnerving, there seems to be a kind of light glowing from within the abscess, giving its inner reaches a pink, seashell iridescence.

At last, as she prepares Erma for her night's sleep, she notices that the patient's skin tingles with a faint electric purr and that the skin is fresh, almost youthful. Wordlessly, she flees the room, forcing her mind to turn to the other patients. The sight of Erma's wound, however, continues to haunt her mind's eye.

ON MONDAY morning, Erma rises through the arena of visions and reminiscences to hear an uncharacteristic clamor in the hallway. She cannot follow the words, but she recognizes Dr. Goring's voice. He has just read the nurse's notes from the weekend, and has grown increasingly exasperated. The final insult is the night nurse's last entry, made only an hour before. The musical intonations of the nurse's voice can almost be heard in the text: "There is a

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transfiguring light pouring from the mouth of the abscess that might be compared with the glow of sunlight through mother-of-pearl. The wound appears to have transcended its fleshly envelope."

"What the hell kind of nursing observations are these?" Dr. Goring is demanding. The head nurse, a nervous fluttering woman, is trying to calm him, a task she has practiced with doctors for many years. "I'll speak to her, Doctor. I'm sure she's just tired. . . . She's worked eight nights straight without a break."

"Well, dammit, if it makes nurses go crazy to work eight nights straight, why do you give them those shitty schedules?"

"Uh, Doctor, I'll see what I can do."

Erma hears Dr. Goring's steps as he approaches the room. His feet slam themselves at the floor as if they are at war with it. Erma wonders briefly if Dr. Goring will find out what has happened, if he will be angry.

"Good morning, Erma!" he shouts, temper barely repressed behind the facade of his merriness.

"Hello, Doctor. How was your weekend?".

"Oh, pretty fair. My wife and I took the camper up to the mountains."

"Really? Where?"

"Not far from Durango. The La Platas Range."

"Oh yes. Fine country, isn't it?"

Dr. Goring, tricked into forgetting his anger, perches precariously on the side of the bed. "Yeah. A good time of year to go, too. Let's see . . . I guess you're from that area somewhere, aren't you?"

"Yes, Cortez. I rode horses all through those mountains."

"Did you? I didn't know you were a rider!"

Erma smiles wanly, "Oh yes. I worked on my father's ranch. I was a jockey for a few years. . . ."

"A jockey! Erma, *you*?" Dr. Goring slips off the edge of the bed in his laughter and has to reseat himself. Completely forgetting the crazy, incompetent nurse's notes, he looks at Erma with a wide grin. "Well, I guess you are on the small side."

"Damn right!" Erma chuckles in her tired voice. "And I rode the winner three years running in the fair up to Grand Junction."

"I'll be!" Dr. Goring says, amazed at this little woman whom he'd given up for dead three days before. "So what happend to your jockey career?"

"Oh, I got married. My husband didn't think it fittin'."

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He chuckles. "Well, times have changed a bit now. There're more women jockeys now."

The idle conversation wanders on, exploring the valleys of Erma's memories. Dr. Goring's laughter can be heard down the hallway at the desk, and the nurses stare amazed at the door to Erma's room.

Fifteen minutes pass, and Dr. Goring is paged. He hurriedly asks Erma if she's decided to stay or leave. Her shy, sunken eyes look up at him seriously, and she says, "Doubt if it matters much. I may as well go on home. It'll be fall soon."

Dr. Goring feels a needle of sadness prick him, mumbles a few words and rushes out. A half hour passes, and Erma signals for the nurse. The head nurse comes in, and, as she is putting Erma on the bedpan, Erma sees that she has been crying.

"What's the matter?"

"Poor Dr. Goring. He just got a telegram. It seems his son has been kidnapped in Beirut. He was at the university there."

"Oh dear," Erma says, and empties her bladder.

It is Monday night. Erma lies in her bed waiting as the disconcerting numbness that has invaded her entire torso moves inside her. Moving more quickly now, it absorbs both legs and extends into her arms. Her eyes glance briefly at the crucifix, but it no longer reminds her of the reality of pain. She understands the answer to its grotesque question, and it seems elementary. As the presence within her expands, the occasional panic she has felt since it began recedes at its edges, and she feels calm, happy.

She experiences the sensation that she is floating, weightless, and cool, not even touching the bed. It is remarkably pleasant, though part of her does not trust or want this unexplained relief that has taken away the years of carefully accumulated pain.

The room is gradually brightening, though no lights are on. Erma is not aware of it at first, but when she notices it, she looks for the source, realizes it is coming from under the sheet, a soft, ineluctable glow. She holds up her hand, not even noticing the twisted, boneless fingers as she stares in awe and admiration at the silvery pinkish light that flows irrepressibly from her hand.

As her amazement increases, the fear and the pain flow backward into her forgotten past. She trusts the wound. For a time she simply basks in

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the penetrating pleasure that the light yields. It is freeing her, she understands, but she has already forgotten what it is from which she has been released.

Gradually she feels completely weightless, and the light seems to be leading her away. She follows, and it is as if moving through the opening of a huge, soft flower or the mouth of a glistening pink womb — but whether she moves in or out of it, she does not know, nor whether it is the mouth of her wound itself. Nor does she care. Her senses tell her that she is radiant, floating, that she is the source of something totally new and ecstatically powerful.

Around her, she is briefly aware, here and there, of some dimming of the light, interferences that she would have once called sadness, war, death. She reaches out and touches them casually as she passes, letting some of the radiance leave her, sensing that she has improved them.

In Mississippi the sun comes out, and the floodwater begins to recede. An insurance adjuster wakes up miles from where his car skidded from wet pavement into a swollen creek. He concludes he must have had a head injury and walked away from the accident.

In Beruit a dazed medical student wonders if he has been drugged. He does not remember his captors releasing him, only waking up on a street near his apartment after less than a day as a hostage.

Bouncing energetically on his crutches, a little boy in the hospital courtyard returns a soccer ball with his one remaining foot and screeches with delight.

Erma, however, is no longer aware of them; she is lost in shining wonder.

Tuesday morning, Erma's body is removed surreptitiously, though all the patients on the floor sense that there has been a death. The hallway is hushed, and a few of the nurses' eyes are rimmed with red.

Dr. Goring, as he writes his summary of Erma's case, does not notice. He is buoyant with the joy of having received a second, miraculous telegram from Lebanon informing him that his son has already been released without injuries. Finishing his work, Dr. Goring leaves the hospital. He is still amazingly happy. The only irritation in his whole world is a blister on his ankle that he got hiking. He'd thought it was improving, but this morning, it seems to have taken a turn for the worse. He wonders momentarily, scratching at it, why it doesn't want to heal.

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Patricia Ferrara wrote "Rising Waters" (F&SF July 1987). Her new story is about a young boy who seems obsessed with a freezer in the basement, and it's a chiller in more ways than one.

Freezer Madness

By Patricia Ferrara

STANDING ON TIPTOE, Jackie could just see neatly piled rows of bagged carrots, boiled just to the prime of their golden orange color, as perfect as glass icicles on a Christmas tree. He started to hum as he stared at them, swaying in time and nibbling at the rubber gasket on the rim of the freezer.

Upstairs, Jacqueline Feuille tensed as she heard the motor of the freezer cut on. It made that peculiar hollow roar only when the lid was up. "Jackie?"

She emptied her glass of sherry, left it on the stove beside the butter melting in the saucepan, and went to the head of the stairs. "Jackie, you put the lid down on that freezer. You hear me?" Still the hollow tone of the motor sounded. "Jackie!"

Jackie had stopped swaying and humming, and stood still. He wasn't sure how his mother knew when he opened the freezer. But he was safe as long as she didn't start to walk downstairs. If she put her foot on the first step, he wouldn't escape a beating; but if he closed the lid before she took

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that first step, she would only scold him. He held the freezer lid open until her voice rose a half-octave and tightened, "*Answer me, young man.*" Then he let the lid fall with a loud thump. "That's better." Her voice went down to its usual pitch. "Now come upstairs. It's too damp down there."

"But *everything's* damp," he protested. "It's raining out."

"Come — up — stairs. *Now.*"

He slumped toward the stairs, letting his hand drift across the cool white enamel of the freezer until he couldn't reach even the farthest rounded corner of the machine. From the bottom of the stairs he could see his mother backlit against the overhead light of the kitchen. She had her hands on her hips; but she wouldn't hit him.

"There's no place else to play."

"Then come up and help me in the kitchen, like a good boy."

"But that's no *fun.*" He climbed up tiredly, kicking each riser in frustration and sighing. His mother loomed at the top of the stairs. "Come on, Jackie. I can't wait all day."

But all day was precisely what Jackie needed to fill, and the stairs helped fill it; he savored them, even as he moped and kicked. Two steps from the top, with retribution in view, he made a sudden feint left, and then scooted right, trying to elude his mother's grasp. But she was too quick for him. She grabbed his arm and twisted it hard.

"Ow! Mama!"

"You gonna mind me next time, mister?" She whacked him on the behind and contined to twist.

Jackie screamed in genuine alarm, and his mother released him. They were both shaken. "How's your arm, honey? Are you O.K.?"

He cringed into the refrigerator. His arm hurt badly.

"Let me see, hon."

He slid away, head down, as she bent toward him.

"I'm sorry, baby. I am. But why do you — oh Christ!" She saw the brown smoke coming from the saucepan and turned to grab the handle; but the handle was hot, and she dropped the pot back down on the burner. The Corning Ware pot separated into two pieces and emptied the burnt butter onto the gas flames, wobbling the sherry glass, meantime, so that it tipped over and shattered on the floor. The grease began burning and spattering onto the stove, the floor, the wall. Jacqueline looked around for something — what? — to stop a grease fire, trying to remember anything special

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about them. You didn't use water? The gas exploded? But the flames flickered out as she stood wondering. When they diminished, she gathered up her scattered wits and poked at the remnants.

In the meantime, Jackie had squeezed into the six-inch gap between refrigerator and countertop. He bit his lower lip hard so he wouldn't yell when his twisted arm squashed into the refrigerator. His mother mustn't notice him and start thinking about his part in the burning of the butter. He tried to make out the clock face, but panic made him jumble up the big and the little hands, and he couldn't be sure what time it was. If it was three o'clock, the paperboy might come to the door and ask for money, and then there would be room to escape outside. But if it was six o'clock, Dad might come home. Dad would ask how the butter got burned.

Jacqueline was muttering under her breath, mopping up the mess, and yelping each time she touched something hot. John hated cooking stinks. She opened the window, and a blast of damp November air swept in, complicating the smells, freshening the air, but not quite cleaning up the evidence. Ammonia would help, and she slopped it around liberally, more for the scent than the cleaning. By the end of ten minutes, she had thrown out or washed over most of the burnt, broken, or greasy things, with the exception of herself. Black grease smudged her hands and arms and apron, and tiny pinheads of grease splattered her all over. But she had plenty of time to take a shower and wash her hair before dinner. Lighthearted again, she scooted up the stairs, untying her apron as she went.

Jackie waited until he heard the hard drizzle of the shower before he shimmied out of his hidey-hole. His arm ached, and a bruise was beginning near the elbow. The kitchen was lonely and smelly. It was better down in the cellar, with the big white freezer humming for company in the dark. He tiptoed downstairs again.

As he leaned his twisted arm against the wall of the freezer, the heat of the bruise seemed to drain away. He moved the arm carefully, getting the freezer on all possible surfaces. He could hear the water flowing through the pipes above his head. When it stopped, the faucet ground heavily onto the washer, the pipes above him shivered, and two light thumps sounded as one foot, then the next, stepped out of the tub. It was time to go.

* * *

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WHEN HIS mother walked into the kitchen, Jackie was setting the table with napkins and silverware. He had collected the silver and waited until she was almost to the kitchen door before he started, so she would notice how good he was being.

She did notice, and rumpled his hair lovingly. "Everything O.K., fella?" She put her arms around him; she was elated from the shower, and this was all very pleasant, but he remained wary as he smiled up at her.

"I'll get the plates down for you, O.K.?" she said brightly. She reached down three plates and three water glasses, then two highball glasses for John and herself. Jackie spooked her as he solemnly and precisely set the table. He set it better than she did, and she tried to stifle her irritation. It was not quite right for a child of his age to be so careful. Sometimes he just . . . but she reached for the sherry bottle and put her son out of her mind. John would've had a few already. He did on rainy days, to keep the cold out on the drive home. What with the car heater broken and the windows open to keep the windshield clear, it was the only way to keep from getting chilled. She poured herself a little sherry and closed the window. The burnt smell was all gone, overwhelmed by the ammonia and the cold air. "Come and sit by me, hon." She settled into the window seat. "We can watch the birds come to the feeder."

He hesitated. "Won't Daddy want his dinner?"

She laughed. "Daddy always wants his dinner."

"Gramma used to cook good," he said suddenly.

"She sure did." Jacqueline shifted in her seat.

"I remember when she used to make jelly —"

"Hon, she died before you were born." His mother had lost her brightness.

"Oh."

"She did make jelly, though. You musta heard me talkin' about it."

"Oh." He concentrated on the precise placement of a plate vis-á-vis silver and glasses, and adjusted the napkin a little. Something was wrong; but he tried his best to ignore it and make it go away. "And she put the jelly jars on a wooden board on the bench, and the lids on the jelly jars went click, like, click, click" — he tried to snap his fingers to show her how — "when the jelly was sealed right. That's how you know it won't go bad."

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"Yeah, I guess so." She took a big, sullen swig of sherry.

"Did Gramma show you how to make the white sauce for the Flora . . . Floratime?"

"Knock it off."

Jackie knocked it off, and set the last glass down in silence. He sat when he was finished, but not with his mother. It didn't look like that particular invitation was still open. He tried to do nothing to catch her attention, but this was difficult, and he received a sharp command to stop kicking his feet on the rungs of his chair. His sigh of resignation brought a quarrelsome look onto his mother's face, and she gulped the last of the sherry down and got up to get some more.

He sat still as she passed behind him. He was tensed and ready to slide under the table if she swung at him, but she just got the sherry, poured some, and started drinking it, bottle in hand, as she leaned against the stove and stared at the wall. "Goddamn white sauce," she muttered into the bowl of the glass. "Goddamn *Florentine!*" She threw the glass into the corner near the window, and the glass smashed as the golden sherry sprayed onto the wall.

Jackie slid under the table. His mother began to cry. She stood near the stove, weeping loudly and clenching her hands into fists around the handle of the oven door. Jackie sat on the floor, watching through the protective jungle of chair legs. His mother began to cough and heave after a while, then left for the bathroom. He could hear her upchucking in the toilet. He crawled quickly out from under the table, grabbed a package of cookies from the bread box, and scooted up to his room.

There was a window seat there as well. The old house was full of wonderful nooks and cubbyholes to hide in. He curled up into the waiting blanket, nibbled his cookies, and stared out the window. But there was nothing much to look at. It wasn't snowing; it was too early in the fall for that. The trees were bare, and the wildlife was scanty. He watched a fat gray squirrel romping on the branches, leaping from tree to tree for fun, but it grew dark after a while, and the squirrel went away. Then he noticed that the window had begun to frost up from his breath, and he helped it along by puffing on the windowpane. When he had produced a clean canvas of nebule, he pondered what to paint on it. But he waited too long, and the nebule began to bead into larger drops, streaking down the window on their own. Peeking through the tracks of the droplets with first

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one eye, then the next, he fell asleep.

The noises downstairs woke him: the murmur of a deep baritone and his mother's laughter, the clatter of bottles and glasses, and some heavy slamming. One chair thudded over on its side. Then came the smell of pork chops burning in the oven, the rising volume of the baritone, a hard slap, and some high-pitched weeping. Jackie breathed heavily, but he didn't move. The baritone got louder, weeping and pleading, and the soprano grew slurred. The drama moved into the living room next, and the walls muffled the voices. Jackie fell asleep again.

The house was quiet when a shaft of late-morning sunlight made him blink awake. He tensed immediately, listening for any sounds that would indicate his mother's whereabouts. There was no sound of footsteps, no clinking of glass from below, no cough-wracked sighs from the bedroom. But she could be lying in wait for him anywhere, half-asleep on the sofa, her head muffled in a pillow, or wrestling the laundry into the dryer, dropping clean socks and underwear on the dirty floor and cursing the perverse intractability of things, any things that came into her hands.

He tiptoed into the bathroom, his bladder full to bursting. But before he relieved himself, he peeked into the clothes hamper. It was full and faintly stinky. The smell of the laundry made him sick to his stomach, and he quickly averted his mind from a fleeting memory of the dryer. Whatever was in store for him, at least it wasn't laundry day. He made use of the facilities, washing his hands fastidiously afterward. But the memory of the snap of his arm against the dryer ambushed him, and he had to go back to the toilet. It wasn't until he finished that he realized that a double flush in such a short time might bring trouble. Mama said the pipes were bad. *"If I have to mop up the water from that toilet one more time, John. . . ."*

Hurriedly zipping up his pants, he listened for the complaint to come echoing up the hall stairs. But there was only silence.

He walked downstairs slowly, alert for sounds and holding his half-empty cookie bag close to his chest so it wouldn't rattle. At the bottom of the stairs, he opened the door to the vestibule, then the dark wooden front door, to see what was what. Brown leaves came swooshing down at him in a gust. Fall was a messy season. But his mother liked it. If she found him, she might say that as long as he had missed school, they would go looking

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for bodany leaves. They never found any, but she would keep on asking about other leaves anyway: Maple? Oak? Elm? And he would guess wrong, and she would get mad.

Or she might be mad at him right off the bat when she saw him.

He carried his bag of cookies to the kitchen, hoping for some fresh milk in the refrigerator for breakfast. But the milk was on the third shelf, at the end of his reach, and he decided against risking a messy spill. Cookie bag in hand, he made the rounds of the first floor. He found his mother on the couch in the parlor, facedown and asleep. She was wearing her shoes and her dress from yesterday. He went back to sit at the kitchen table.

Gramma used to make waffles with raspberry sauce for breakfast and serve him at the table. He would have a cloth napkin in his lap, crisp from the iron, and she would bustle around while he ate. Now the pan of burnt pork chops sat there, with a scorched oven mitt soaking in the blackened grease at the bottom of the pan. He poked and sniffed at the tiny, hard chops. They were glued down tight to the pan. They didn't look good to eat. But he was bored with cookies, and his mind wandered to the freezer, to the neat rows and bright colors cooling away in the clean whiteness, quiet and safe. He could go down and look in the freezer after breakfast.

He finished his fifth cookie and tried to think of something to drink. The water faucet was too high. He would have to stand on a chair to reach it. He could go outside and put his mouth against the faucet and get some water there, though. That was just his height. And it would be fun. Then he could go down to the cellar. With a light heart, he scampered out the back door, banging it loudly behind him, intent on his goal. The air was fresh and cool; it would be winter soon. Jacketless and shivering, he ran to the faucet at the back of the house and turned it, reaching over the basin of slick, hard mud beneath the spout. Nothing happened. He turned it some more. The faucet and pipe rumbled and quivered dryly. Something had gone wrong. He had broken it. His panic immediately pushed him; he leaped at the faucet to turn it off, missed, and fell sideways into the mud. He squirmed up toward the terrible rumble above him and grabbed frantically at the faucet, then twisted it until the awful noise stopped. Still panicked and crying, he stumbled out of the mud. He had made a mistake.

He screamed aloud with fear, shuddering at the mud on his clothes, his

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Still panicked and crying, he stumbled out of the mud. He had made a mistake.

arm, his leg. How could he hide it? How could he make it go away? He howled out his misery, a miniature Lear stumbling blindly across the ragged leaf-strewn lawn. Finally he had to stop and breathe.

He could do the laundry. It was possible. She would never find the muddy clothes. It would be a long time before she found the broken faucet. Maybe she would think it got broke by itself. He could put the clothes in the tub and put a plastic packet of stuff in with it. He turned the plan over in his head, looking for flaws. It seemed foolproof. He could carry laundry O.K., and he could put the packet in. He wouldn't drop anything. She'd see that he'd done something good. And he could get past the dryer part somehow, even though his arm throbbed when he thought about it.

He started right away, methodically taking his dirty clothes off by the step, and shivering in the autumn sun as he fumbled off his shoes and socks and padded into the house on cleanish bare feet. He could wear his bathrobe and underwear and slippers. And the best part was, as soon as the machine started going, even if she woke up, he'd be just being a really good boy.

It went beautifully, all of it, even putting the machine dials on. When the water began to flow under the closed lid, he fluttered into a moment of perfect happiness and savored it, leaning against the great square washer as if it were a rock.

But relief soon became boring, and he twiddled the tassles on the robe of his belt for a while, braiding them together and then unwinding them, before he began to wander around the cellar looking for something to do — something that would pointedly not include the freezer. He'd had a close call just now; the freezer could wait. He banged the keys on the old upright piano, out of tune and missing two hammers; but such a lot of noise might wake up Mama and make her mad, so he stopped. He pried the tops off of the cardboard boxes stacked against the wall until the cardboard sagged and tore, but found only old clothes and books. He let them be.

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He stared for a while at a photograph on the wall. He knew every inch of the photo. It showed his mother, much younger, in white shorts, squinting against the sunlight. Beside her was Gramma, looking old in the harsh light, but too dignified to squint. Behind them was the house, very spruce, with clean white paint covering every bit of gingerbread, and a snappy little garden of annuals neatly set off from the cropped lawn. Neither woman was smiling, really, but his mother looked like she was trying to; but then again, maybe it was just part of the squint. He remembered the day the picture was taken. That was before his parents were married. Papa had taken the picture with Gramma's old black camera, but Gramma hadn't wanted him to. Gramma had work to do. That was the first day Gramma said Papa couldn't come back. Mama had cried. Gramma had stood firm.

He began to trace the outline of his mother on the photo. Even his littlest finger was too fat and clumsy to trace the details, so he flipped over to the edge of his fingernail. The nail made a crude circle around her head, then squashed down, blotting out her face. The bouffant pyramid of hair escaped his finger, so he switched to his thumb, and got all but the outermost dark crescent. She was gone.

He was startled to find himself humming and swaying as he did this, and pulled away from the picture. He'd left a big fingerprint smudge around his mother. He rubbed it with his knuckles and the flat of his hand, humming again. He mustn't be messy.

The washing machine stopped abruptly after the wash cycle, startling him. He looked toward it, wondering if something was wrong. Then the freezer motor cut on. He swiveled his face quickly in that direction. It rumbled quietly, coaxingly, from the other side of the piano. He could see the edge of it, sleek and white behind the old black piano. He could see more of it now; his feet were moving toward it. He looked down at them, curious. In the darkness of the cellar, he saw his pale feet pop out from under the swinging robe, flatten out on the gray concrete, and disappear again under the plaid flannel. They moved regularly — one, two, one, two — and the robe and tassels swayed in time. The freezer was on the right now, but he kept his head bent to see whether the rhythm would mess up when he turned and stopped. It did. Everything went jumble and kaflooey. But then the robe readjusted to a new rhythm as he swayed back and forth and hummed.

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The chrome strip in front of him had letters on it. The writing probably said not to open the lid because it was bad. He would be in trouble if he opened it. No matter how fast asleep Mama was, she always knew when he opened it. The motor hummed soothingly at him, though. There were raspberries inside somewhere. Strawberries, too. Those were his favorite. Every summer, Gramma went berrying, filling quart pails with wild blueberries, thimbleberries, and fat red raspberries.

The motor clicked off, and he jumped back. It was spooky the way it did that. He looked over to the side a bit; the black plug hung loosely in the outlet. He brushed up against it gently; it was really just an accident. It wasn't his fault if Mama let the cords get all dusty and loose in the sockets. But at least the motor wouldn't cut on and off and scare him like it always did. He flipped the latch back and pushed the lid up and felt around. He was too short to look and touch at the same time, and as he reached down, his face flattened out against the cold enamel on the side of the freezer.

He reached in and pulled out a lumpy bundle: carrots. One by one, he pulled out all the lumpy plastic bags he could reach: carrots, peas, beans, mixed vegetables, but there were no berries. Underneath the lumps were solid rectangles. He pulled at one, but it was too heavy, and it dropped back with a flat *whomp*. He stood very high on tiptoe and peered in. There were some lumpy bags at the rear, but he couldn't reach them. Below was a solid troop of rectangular pans covered with foil, labeled, and stuffed in plastic. They rippled up and down a bit, rather than lying flat. He jumped up and balanced himself on the edge of the freezer and pried his fingers under one pan and levered it up. There was a big green plastic trash bag under it. This was awfully disorganized. The bag ought to be on top of the pans. He ought to tidy it up a bit. And if he took the rectangles out, the interesting lumpy bags in the back might fall into his grasp.

He unbent from where he hung over the edge of the freezer. His arms were cold, his chest hurt where he had balanced himself. Behind him the washing machine spun loudly, then vibrated to a halt. After a moment came the *click* that signaled the official end of the last cycle. He sighed. It was time for the dryer.

Leaving the lid of the freezer propped open as a comfort, he began unloading the washer. One by one, he grabbed the flattened clothes from the sides of the tub and hugged them to his chest in a little pile, careful

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not to drop them on the dirty floor. Then he waddled two steps over to the dryer and quickly shoved them in, trying not to touch the repugnant machine. Then he went back for another fistful of clothes, and another, until he had to climb up and balance himself on the edge of the washer to get the last few pieces at the bottom. He was happy when he could finally close the dryer door and set the dial. The machine ground a bit, then took off with a roar. That was over, now, for a long time, and he could look for the strawberries again.

"Jackie?"

His mother's voice came from the top of the stairs. He froze in place. "Jackie, what are you doing down there?" Her voice was sleepy and rough with phlegm. He didn't answer. She started walking downstairs. "What's that noise?"

He stood still and silent, not having the faintest idea what else to do. The lumpy bags of vegetables lay scattered all around, defrosting in small pools of water on the dirty floor, and the freezer lay open wide.

When Jacqueline reached the bottom of the stairs and saw the mess before her, she merely opened her mouth silently and stared. Jackie stepped backward by instinct and bumped loudly into the dryer, then jumped forward again when he felt the heat. His mother looked at him as if she didn't exactly see him, then looked back at the mess around the open freezer. She hadn't begun hitting, but he was somehow thinking that this wasn't a good sign. She raised her hand up to her mouth, but it wobbled and floated to her forehead, then her hair, without stopping anyplace; it sailed on up above her head and finally clutched at the air shakily. Her other hand rose slowly, following the first, up past her stomach to her breast, then her neck. There movement shuddered to a halt, and she asked huskily, without turning, "Did you turn the freezer off?"

He stared at his mother, as fascinated by her as she was by the freezer. He almost wished that she would try to hit him. He knew about that. He didn't know about this. His mother looked sick, too sick to hit him.

But he was wrong; her face quivered and broke into little pieces that seemed unrelated to one another, and turned slowly and silently toward him. One of her eyes bulged; the other shrank into a squint. She moved toward him in fragments, like a badly built robot, unspeaking. There were no names bad enough to call him, no yelling to be done. He let out a shriek

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before she was within eight feet of him, and then he bolted for the stairs. She blocked him, and he swerved toward the bulkhead stairs instead, his mouth now clamped shut over his fear; but the door was locked, and her zombie-trot was quick behind him. He dodged again, spurted blindly ahead — and into the side of the dryer. His mother's hands clutched him from behind while he was still blinking stupidly from the shock.

Neither of them heard the rumblings from the freezer, the faint rattle of plastic and the shifting of glass. But when the first casserole pans smashed to the floor, they both looked. The green trash bag had risen up over the rim of the freezer.

His mother screamed, and her fingers clutched his shoulder hard and mindlessly. The trash bag turned toward the sound. His mother's scream degenerated into a moan as the trash bag gradually stood upright, and gnarled, frost-whitened hands appeared from below, shrugging off the crumpled bag.

"Gramma!" Jackie struggled out of his mother's hands.

"No," Jacqueline moaned. "Jackie, go upstairs like a good boy."

"But it's *Gramma*, Mama." He was confused, but grinning happily.

"Gramma's dead." She didn't sound convinced, even though Gramma did indeed look quite dead. A large brown stain marred the front of the old woman's frozen apron, and she stood quite still, her eyelids too cold to blink. She stared, her face blank, at the voices across the cellar.

"Go upstairs."

Jackie looked uneasy, despite his previous enthusiasm. "I have to go past her to get upstairs."

"Go through the bulkhead. *Go*." Jacqueline shoved her son hard, but still did not look at him.

He, too, kept his eyes on the freezer as he walked reluctantly to the bulkhead. There was no hurry. Gramma moved stiffly and slowly when she moved at all, and right now she seemed to have collapsed back into the freezer.

Jacqueline sighed and moved forward hesitantly at this, muttering encouragement to herself. It would be an easy thing to close the freezer lid on top of her mother, lock it, and then put the plug in again. She might have to touch the old woman a bit, but she'd just have to do it. It wasn't real, anyway. Maybe it was the booze. She would give up drinking. She would. At least she would go lighter on it. All she had to do was get the

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courage to come just a little nearer the freezer and shove the lid down. But the rustle and scrape inside the freezer turned her stomach; she was going to upchuck; no, she wasn't. Just a little closer, that was all. A sudden push, and she was there, leaning slightly over the freezer, her hands on the lid. But coming toward her from below was the knife, the one she had hidden in the freezer along with her mother. *Oops, I forgot about that.* There it was now, thrust straight through her, its cold blade quite uncomfortable in her middle. She shoved the blade and the withered hand down, shut the lid and latched it before she gave in to the panic of the red smear trickling down her front.

"Jackie," she said, her throat already bubbly with blood. "Jackie, you've got to help Mama. Get Papa." She shuddered and fell quietly onto the freezer, her blood painting a large red stripe down the white enamel as she slid to the floor.

Jackie's hand was sweating on the lock to the bulkhead door. He pulled at it automatically as he stared over his shoulder. He was beyond panic, and moving according to some other set of rules. The sound of the dryer brought him up short; the cycle was over. His clothes were ready. He went over to the dryer, opened the door, and carefully emptied the lint trap. He found his pants and shirt easily, but the socks were very hard to see in the dark. They came at last, after most of the rest of the clothes had been tumbled into the laundry basket. He put his clothes on, wrinkled and warm.

It bothered him just a little that Jacqueline was dead; but there it was. She had disobeyed Gramma, and then killed her when Gramma said she couldn't marry that awful John. It was only fair that Gramma got to kill her back. He smoothed out his clothes a little bit, and put his hands in his pockets to make his pants lie right. It wasn't as good as ironing, but he looked presentable. He'd gotten the clothes just as the cycle finished, before the wrinkles had time to set.

He carried the basket of laundry carefully upstairs and put it in the kitchen by the ironing board. It was well past lunchtime, and he hadn't had anything to eat. The pork chops from last night still sat in their pan of charred grease, stinking up the kitchen. He reached for the bag of cookies on the table, but a sudden *whomp* from downstairs made him stop. It was definitely Gramma. He went to the head of the stairs. The motor of the freezer still hadn't cut on. The plug was out — that was why. He walked

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downstairs slowly, listening for more noises, and stopped in front of the freezer. The vegetables now sat in a large puddle of stinking water mixed with blood and the dirt and dust of the cellar. Overturned pans of cooked stew were beginning to liquify. He could hear the dripping as they defrosted into a mess.

"Gramma?" he called pretty loudly. There was an answering *whomp* from inside the freezer. "Gramma, it's Jackie." Another *whomp* came in answer. "I'm going to open the freezer now." Another *whomp*.

He leaned past his mother and gingerly released the latch, trying not to mess his fingers in the sticky blood too much. The lid pushed up as soon as he undid the latch, and Gramma peered out at him blindly, the knife firmly clutched in her hand. She pushed the lid open all the way, very slowly, and looked around.

"Gramma?" Jackie said again. "Gramma?" she looked at him.

"Gramma, Papa comes home at six for dinner. Can we have pork chops with Floratime sauce tonight?"

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

WHAT ARE LITTLE STARS MADE OF?

MY DEAR wife Janet and I have a small ritual that consists of tracking each other. We are always together, but occasionally one or the other of us is forced to venture out into the wide world alone. Since we grow uneasy if we are at opposite ends of the apartment, you can well imagine that this separation is traumatic.

First, there are the preliminary anxious injunctions about "being careful" and references to madcap traffic, falling cornices, and dubious bystanders. Then, when either of us gets to where he or she is going, a phone call reporting safe arrival is considered *de rigeur*. And, finally, an estimate of the return time having been made, we know when to put our worry machines into high gear. So far, I must say, nothing has happened to either of us, but each time is a new risk.

Janet is particularly good at this and manages to begin being concerned about half an hour *before* the time I have set for return. I sometimes miss because I may get involved in my writing, and, when that happens, I often, quite literally, don't know what time it is.

Janet, as it happens, goes out on many Monday evenings to meetings at her psychoanalytic Institute, and invariably comes home between nine and nine-fifteen.

Came one Monday when I was busily involved at the word processor and I happened to look at my watch and notice that it was 10 P.M. Janet had not yet returned, but I had forgotten about that. What clicked in my mind was that it was time for "Newhart," one of my favorite TV shows, so I turned it on.

At 10:05 P.M., Janet returned, having been kept late by some sort of prolonged discussion at the Institute, and, in a semi-frenzy, thinking I was half-dead with worry, she was about to apologize feverishly, when she noticed my eyes were on

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the TV screen and that I was waving to her absently.

She said, rather sharply, "Weren't you *worried*?"

I'm an old hand at the marriage game, of course, so I knew better than to admit I had lost track of time. I said, indignantly, "Of course, I was worried. Fearfully worried. Desperately worried."

"And what were you going to do about it?" she wanted to know.

"I was going to call the Institute, ask where you were, and, if you were still there, I was going to come down and get you."

She said, "*When* were you going to do that?"

And I said, pointing to the TV, "Just as soon as 'Newhart' was finished."

Fortunately, Janet has a sense of humor, so she burst into laughter and said she was glad to know her place in the scheme of things.

Well, after the two previous essays, I am still trying to place the Sun in the scheme of things, so let's continue.

As I explained in the previous two essays, it was Aristotle's opinion that the Sun, and all other heavenly objects, were composed of materials totally different from those making up the Earth, and, for nearly two thousand years, scholars followed him in this thought.

Only in 1609 did this long-held opinion begin to be shaken. In that year, Galileo (1564-1642) pointed a telescope at the sky for the first time. Looking at the Moon, he saw a world with craters and mountain ranges and what looked like seas. In short, it closely resembled Earth in physical appearance.

What's more, as other astronomers began to use telescopes, it was found that the planets showed discs and were therefore worlds rathers than points of light. They rotated on their axes as Earth did. Some showed clear evidence of atmosphere and clouds. Mars had polar ice-caps, and so on.

The more planets were studied, the more they seemed Earth-like in one fashion or another, and if they had the *appearance* of Earth, might they not have the general chemical composition of Earth? Still, argument from similarity of appearance is interesting, but it's not proof.

But other types of similarity arose. Isaac Newton (1642-1727) published his theory of universal gravitation in 1687 and showed, quite conclusively, that the planets were subject to the same gravitational forces that Earthly objects were. He even considered those forces to be universal, governing every object in the Universe. If earthly and heavenly bodies were, after all, subject to the same laws of nature, might they

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not be composed of the same general substances?

Well, for one thing, Newton's view had its limitations. He might say that the law of gravitation was universal, but he could only apply it to the objects making up the Solar system. To be sure, in Newton's time the Solar system was thought to make up the whole Universe except for an unimportant powdering of background stars on the firmament.

By 1793, however, the German born British astronomer William Herschel (1738-1833) had shown that there were double stars that circled each other. These circlings were shown to fit Newton's theory of universal gravitation exactly, and, since then, there has been no doubt that gravitation (and, indeed, the other laws of nature) are universal.

Nevertheless, even if everything in the Universe obeys the same laws of nature, that does not necessarily prove that all objects in the Universe are made up of the same basic materials. An ivory billiard ball and a plastic billiard ball may follow the same laws of motion and may have the same elasticity, hardness, and so on, but that doesn't prove that ivory and plastic are identical materials.

It would seem that the only way we could really determine the chemical nature of a heavenly body such as the Sun would be actually to obtain a piece of it and subject it to chemical analysis. It is not surprising, then, that in 1835 Auguste Comte (as I said at the end of the previous essay) gave it as his opinion that the chemical constitution of the stars was an example of the kind of information science would be eternally incapable of attaining.

But something *does* reach us from the stars, and from the Sun in particular. That fact has been known ever since humanity's ancestors developed a brain large enough to enable them to wonder about the surrounding Universe. Light reaches us from all the heavenly objects we can see, and most of all from the Sun.

The question, then, is whether light can tell us anything about the chemical constitution of those objects, in particular, of the Sun.

If light were uniform, structureless, and unchanging, no matter what the source, then it would yield us no information and would be useless as a guide to the nature of the source emitting it.

In 1665, Newton showed that light was *not* uniform and structureless. It was a mixture of different colors that could be spread out, when passed through a glass prism, into a spectrum of colors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and

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violet, each one shading gradually into the next.

Light was obviously bent (that is "refracted") through glass to different degrees, but the difference in properties that made such differing refraction possible remained speculative until 1801, when a British physicist, Thomas Young (1773-1829), demonstrated that light was a wave phenomenon and even showed that the waves were tiny, less than a millionth of a meter in length. Presumably, then, ordinary light — say, from the Sun — was a mixture of waves of light of different length. The glass prism sorted them out, each bit of light being refracted to an amount that depended on its wavelength; the shorter the wavelength, the greater the refraction. The light spectrum, then, consisted of an orderly progression of wavelengths from the longest visible waves of red light to the shortest visible waves of violet light, the different groups of wavelengths reacting differently with the pigments in the retina to give rise to the notion of color in the brain.

There was some question as to the nature of light waves. There are two kinds of waves known. One kind is like those in sound, where the waves are compressed and relaxed alternately in the direction of travel ("longitudinal waves"). There are also waves of the kind that appear on the surface of disturbed water, where the waves move up and down at right angles to the direction of travel ("transverse waves").

In 1814, the French physicist Augustin Jean Fresnel (1788-1827) showed that light waves were transverse waves.

Now how does that help us? The Sun sends out a vast mixture of tiny transverse waves of every conceivable wavelength, and we can separate them and line them up in order, but how does one go from there to chemical composition? I doubt that anyone in Fresnel's time thought that there was any question of going from one to the other. There seemed no connection whatever.

In that same year of 1814, however, a German optician, Joseph von Fraunhofer (1787-1826), was working with lenses, prisms and so on. He was the best optician of his time, and he had to know the precise refracting abilities of the glass he used. He tested prisms by passing sunlight through them and forming a spectrum.

However, the spectrum was not continuous. It was interrupted by narrow regions of darkness. Here and there in sunlight there were missing wavelengths of light and therefore the dark regions.

There is a small puzzle as to

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why these dark interruptions were never noticed before. Some think that Newton, once he formed the first spectrum by use of a prism, ought to have noticed them. In 1802, a British chemist, William Hyde Wollaston (1766-1828), saw a few, but attaching little importance to the matter, didn't follow it up.

To me it seems simply a matter of Fraunhofer making use of very high quality glass and perfectly ground prisms. Where Wollaston observed some seven regions of darkness, Fraunhofer detected nearly six hundred. What's more, he mapped them, noting that they always fell in the same spots along the spectrum, whether he used direct sunlight, or sunlight reflected by the Moon or the planets. (Modern physicists, by the way, can detect some thousand lines in the solar spectrum.)

For over forty years, nothing much was done with those spectral lines, and yet chemists were aware of an interrelationship between earthly light and chemical composition.

As early as the 1750's, a Swedish mineralogist, Axel Fredrik Cronstedt (1722-1765), had introduced the use of a blowpipe in which a hot flame was played upon minerals. Information about their chemical constitution could be obtained from the colors that appeared in the flame, in the vapors produced, in the ash, and so on.

As time went on, it was discovered that the vapors of heated substances produced a characteristic light. Hot sodium vapors tended to produce a yellow light; potassium vapors a violet light; barium vapors a green light; strontium vapors a red light and so on. It is indeed such effects that are used to produce spectacular sprays of color in fireworks.

One of those interested in the study of these colors was a German chemist, Robert Wilhelm Bunsen (1811-1899). He studied heated minerals carefully, but, of course, the flame he used for heating usually contributed colors of its own, which tended to obscure the results.

Bunsen, therefore, made use of a kind of burner, which he improved in 1857, that fed air into natural gas, producing such complete burning that a flame was produced that was hot indeed but produced very little color. This was a "Bunsen burner," and when I was studying chemistry half a century ago, such burners were still absolutely essential pieces of laboratory equipment.

Using the Bunsen burner meant that the colors developed by heating minerals were clearer, less confused, and more effective in differentiating one material from another. Then a German physicist, Gustav Robert

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Kirchhoff (1824-1887), who frequently worked with Bunsen, had the key idea. Why study the colors by eye alone? Why not pass the colored light through a prism?

Bunsen and Kirchhoff developed the first "spectroscope" by allowing the light to pass through a narrow slit before passing through the prism. Each different wavelength of light was refracted by a characteristic amount and fell upon the screen in a particular place as the image of the slit in a particular color. If all the wavelengths of light were present, then they would line up like soldiers in close-order drill, forming a continuous spectrum. Dense materials, heated to incandescence, produce such continuous spectra.

Vapors, however, produce only certain wavelengths of light. A mineral that, on heating, released sodium vapors will produce chiefly light of two closely spaced wavelengths located in the yellow region of the spectrum.

By 1859, Kirchhoff, after studying numerous minerals, announced that every different type of atom produced its own pattern of spectral lines when heated to incandescent vapor. The different elements could then be identified by their spectral "fingerprints."

Of course, it was inevitable that eventually some mineral would be heated and would deliver a spectral line in a spot where no spectral line of any known element was located. The conclusion would be that a hitherto unknown element had been detected.

On May 10, 1860, Kirchhoff announced that a certain mineral had produced a line in the blue region of the spectrum that was not identified with any lines produced by any known element. There was a new element present in the mineral that he named "cesium" (from a Latin word for "sky-blue"). Once chemists knew cesium was there they treated the mineral with usual chemical procedures and produced the element itself.

Within a year, Kirchhoff had discovered a red line that marked the existence of the element "rubidium" (from a Latin word for "red"). In the same way, other chemists discovered "indium" (from "indigo") and "thallium" (from the Greek word for "leaf-green").

But what has this to do with the heavenly bodies?

Kirchhoff couldn't help but notice, in 1859, that the two closely spaced yellow lines produced by heated sodium vapor seemed to fall in the same place in the spectrum as did two dark lines of the solar spectrum that were first recorded by Fraunhofer nearly half a century earlier. Fraunhofer had labelled

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those two dark lines as "D," and it seemed to Kirchhoff that the D-lines of the solar spectrum had to have some connection with the yellow lines of glowing sodium.

Perhaps it was just an apparent connection. Perhaps the dark lines and the yellow lines were not *exactly* in the same place. Kirchhoff thought of a way of testing the matter. He would let sunlight pass through hot sodium vapor before passing through the slit of the spectroscope. The sodium vapor would supply yellow light that might just fit those wavelengths missing from sunlight, with the result that the solar spectrum plus sodium light would erase those D-lines and leave a smooth, unsullied stretch of light.

It didn't happen! To Kirchhoff's surprise, the D-lines were still there. In fact, they were darker than they would be in the absence of the flowing sodium.

He experimented further and found this: A heated element emits certain wavelengths of light characteristic of itself. If, however, light from a source that forms a continuous spectrum is passed through vapor that is colder than itself, that vapor would *absorb* light of precisely the wavelength it would *emit* if it were hot enough.

Thus sodium produces a characteristic double line of light in the yellow when it is heated. When light passes through sodium vapor from some source hotter than itself, the sodium vapor absorbs those same wavelengths and produces a double dark line where those wavelengths are now missing. When Kirchhoff allowed sunlight to pass through sodium vapor, the vapor did not supply yellow light, it absorbed it, making the dark lines darker. This effect of emitting when hotter and absorbing when cooler is called "Kirchhoff's law."

Now we can understand why there are dark lines in the Solar spectrum. Light is formed from heated layers of the Sun's blazing surface, and it produces a continuous spectrum because of the complexity of the dense structure. The continuous spectrum of sunlight passes through the vapors of the solar atmosphere that lies above the light-producing surface. The atmosphere, though hot by Earthly standards, is cooler than the surface, and it absorbs some of the wavelengths of light, so that the spectrum when it reaches us and our instruments is crossed by thousands of dark lines indicating missing wavelengths.

From the dark D-lines in the solar spectrum, we can deduce that sodium atoms are included in the solar atmosphere; sodium atoms, moreover, that have the same properties in the Sun that they would

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have on the Earth.

Kirchhoff had, in this way, disproved Comte's categorial assertion of impossibility just two years after Comte's death, but not everyone was impressed. Kirchhoff had a banker, who, on learning that Kirchhoff had invented a way of detecting elements in the sun said (with uncommon stupidity — but, then, he was a banker), "Of what use is gold in the Sun if it cannot be brought down to Earth?"

When Kirchhoff was later awarded a medal and a prize in golden sovereigns from Great Britain for his work on spectroscopy, he deposited the money with his banker, saying, "Here is gold from the Sun."

Others began to study the Sun and other heavenly bodies by means of this new and very powerful technique. The Swedish physicist Anders Jonas Angstrom (1814-1874) began to study the Solar spectrum in the finest detail and, in 1862, announced the presence of lines in the Solar system that were characteristic of hydrogen. This was important because, as it eventually turned out, hydrogen was the major component of the Sun and of the Universe generally.

Angstrom went on to discover lines characteristic of other elements and, in 1868, he published a map of the spectrum locating the wavelengths of about a thousand lines with great care.

What's more, he measured the wavelengths of those lines in units equal to a ten-billionth of a meter. This unit was officially named the "Angstrom unit" in 1905. It is still used for this purpose, sometimes, to this day, but it is not part of the SI version of the metric system that is now official throughout the scientific world. Wavelengths of light should be measured in nanometers, where one nanometer is equal to 10 Angstrom units.

The Sun was not the only luminous body studied. Angstrom himself studied the spectrum of the aurora borealis in 1867.

More important still was the work of the British astronomer William Huggins (1824-1910). He studied the spectra of nebulae, of stars, of planets, of comets, of anything the light of which he could make pass through a telescope, then a slit, then a prism, in order to produce a visible spectrum.

In 1863, he announced from a study of spectral lines of the light of various stars, that the same elements that existed on Earth, existed not only in the Sun, but in all the stars he studied. From that time on, scientists have been convinced that when they had discovered that there were only 81 elements possessing one or more stable isotopes here on

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Earth, what they had really discovered was that there were only 81 elements possessing one or more stable isotopes anywhere in the Universe.

There have been times, to be sure, when it seemed that a new element was indicated by spectral analysis of light from a heavenly object, an element that, as far as anyone knew, did not exist on Earth.

The best known case of this came in 1868, when a French astronomer, Pierre Jules Cesar Janssen (1824-1907), was in India, studying light from the Solar corona during a total eclipse of the Sun. He detected lines that he could not identify and he sent the data to a British astronomer, Joseph Norman Lockyer (1836-1920), who was an expert on spectroscopy. Lockyer concurred with Janssen's suggestion that the lines represented an unknown element and he named it "helium," from the Greek word for "Sun."

For twenty-seven years, helium seemed to be what we might call an "Aristotelian element," one that occurred in heavenly bodies but not on Earth. In 1895, however, a British chemist, William Ramsay (1852-1916), heard of a gas that had been obtained from a uranium mineral in the United States, one that had been identified as nitrogen, because it was odorless, colorless, and chemically inert (that is, reluctant to take part in chemical reactions). All this was characteristic of nitrogen.

Ramsay, however, had just participated in the discovery of argon, which was a gas that, like nitrogen, was colorless, odorless and chemically inert, but was *not* nitrogen. (Argon was even more inert than nitrogen, for nitrogen would react with other substances in some cases, but argon never did.) The easiest way of distinguishing argon from nitrogen was to heat the gases strongly and study the spectral lines. The two elements might seem very similar in many ways, but their spectral fingerprints were completely different.

It seemed to Ramsay that the so-called nitrogen obtained from the uranium mineral might possibly be argon. Ramsay obtained a sample and studied the spectral lines it produced.

Right! It was definitely not nitrogen.

But it was not argon, either. In fact — and here Ramsay must have been completely flabbergasted — the spectral lines were precisely those observed in sunlight during that eclipse of 1868. It was *helium* — and on Earth!

Since 1868, there have been other spectral lines detected that were not matched by anything on Earth. Other unknown elements

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were postulated and given names such as "cornium," "geocoronium," "nebulium," and so on. These were all false alarms. They didn't even represent new elements that were eventually found on Earth as well. They turned out to be atoms of perfectly ordinary elements, such as iron, under conditions so extreme that the lines in question were never ordinarily produced on Earth.

If you're curious, we might summarize what we know of the composition of the Sun now. It is composed almost entirely of two elements, the two that happen to have atoms of the simplest structure: hydrogen and helium. The sun is, in terms of mass, roughly three-quarters hydrogen and one-quarter helium.

All the other elements we know on Earth also exist in the Sun but in minor quantities. The elements other than hydrogen and helium make up perhaps 1.6 percent of the mass of the Sun. Of these minor elements, 50 percent of the mass is oxygen and 30 percent is carbon. All the other elements make up the remaining 20 percent of the 1.6 percent (that is, 0.3. percent of the mass of the Sun altogether).

This makes it look as though there *is* a basic difference in composition between the Sun and the Earth. Whereas the Sun is 98+ percent hydrogen and helium, Earth, as a whole, according to most estimates is 98+ percent of six elements, iron, oxygen, silicon, magnesium, nickel and sulfur. There is no overlap.

The difference, however, is not really fundamental. The entire Solar system formed out of a single cloud of dust and gas, with a composition much like that of the Sun. Objects that are very massive, like the Sun, have gravitational fields that can hold on to everything. Consequently the Sun has much the composition of the original cloud except for the conversion of some of its hydrogen to helium in the course of the nuclear fusion that has kept it blazing for 4.6 billion years.

If an object is moderately massive, but cold (it is easier to hold on to light atoms in the cold), then again, the composition would be that of the original cloud. Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune are probably almost entirely hydrogen and helium.

If an object is small, however, it lacks the gravitational pull required to hold on to hydrogen and helium, and it is made up of the minor elements in the cloud. Thus satellites of the outer planets may be rich in icy materials (containing carbon, oxygen and all the rest, and some hydrogen in combination with oxygen, forming frozen water).

Small objects that are also quite

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1988 was a good year for Mike Resnick and his superior SF work with an African background. A novel, IVORY, was published by TOR to excellent notices, and his story "Kirinyaga" (F&SF November 1988) won several award nominations. The story below also takes place on the far-future recreation of Kenya known as Kirinyaga.

FOR I HAVE TOUCHED THE SKY

By Mike Resnick

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN men had wings.

Ngai, who sits alone on His throne atop Kirinyaga, which is now called Mount Kenya, gave men the gift of flight, so that they might reach the succulent fruits on the highest branches of the trees. But one man, a son of Gikuyu, who was himself the first man, saw the eagle and the vulture riding high upon the winds, and, spreading his wings, he joined them. He circled higher and higher, and soon he soared far above all other flying things.

Then, suddenly, the hand of Ngai reached out and grabbed the son of Gikuyu.

"What have I done that you should grab me thus?" asked the son of Gikuyu.

"I live atop Kirinyaga because it is the top of the world," answered Ngai, "and no one's head may be higher than my own."

And so saying, Ngai plucked the wings from the son of Gikuyu, and then

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took wings away from *all* men, so that no man could ever again rise higher than His head.

And that is why all of Gikuyu's descendents look at the birds with a sense of loss and envy, and why they no longer eat the succulent fruits from the highest branches of the trees.

We have many birds on the world of Kirinyaga, which was named for the holy mountain where Ngai dwells. We brought them along with our other animals when we received our charter from the Eutopian Council and departed from a Kenya that no longer had any meaning for true members of the Kikuyu tribe. Our new world is home to the marabou and the vulture, the ostrich and the fish eagle, the weaver and the heron, and many other species. Even I, Koriba, who am the *mundumugu* — the witch doctor — delight in their many colors, and find solace in their music. I have spent many afternoons seated in front of my *boma*, my back propped up against an ancient acacia tree, watching the profusion of colors and listening to the melodic songs as the birds come to slake their thirst in the river that winds through our village.

It was on one such afternoon that Kamari, a young girl who was not yet of circumcision age, walked up the long, winding path that separates my *boma* from the village, holding something small and gray in her hands.

"*Jambo*,Koriba," she greeted me.

"*Jambo*, Kamari," I answered her. "What have you brought to me, child?"

"This," she said, holding out a young pygmy falcon that struggled weakly to escape her grasp. "I found him in my family's *shamba*. He cannot fly."

"He looks fully fledged," I noted, getting to my feet. Then I saw that one of his wings was held at an awkward angle. "Ah!" I said. "He has broken his wing."

"Can you make him well, *mundumugu*?" asked Kamari.

I examined the wing briefly, while she held the young falcon's head away from me. Then I stepped back.

"I can make him well, Kamari," I said. "But I cannot make him fly. The wing will heal, but it will never be strong enough to bear his weight again. I think we will destroy him."

"No!" she exclaimed, pulling the falcon back. "You will make him live, and I will care for him!"

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I stared at the bird for a moment, then shook my head. "He will not wish to live," I said at last.

"Why not?"

"Because he has ridden high upon the warm winds."

"I do not understand," said Kamari, frowning.

"Once a bird has touched the sky," I explained, "he can never be content to spend his days on the ground."

"I will *make* him content," she said with determination. "You will heal him, and I will care for him, and he will live."

"I will heal him, and you will care for him," I said. "But," I added, "he will not live."

"What is your fee, Koriba?" she asked, suddenly businesslike.

"I do not charge children," I answered. "I will visit your father tomorrow, and he will pay me."

She shook her head adamantly. "This is *my* bird. *I* will pay the fee."

"Very well," I said, admiring her spirit, for most children — and *all* adults — are terrified of their *mundumugu*, and would never openly contradict or disagree with him. "For one month you will clean my *boma* every morning and every afternoon. You will lay out my sleeping blankets, and keep my water gourd filled, and you will see that I have kindling for my fire."

"That is fair," she said after a moment's consideration. Then she added: "What if the bird dies before the month is over?"

"Then you will learn that a *mundumugu* knows more than a little Kikuyu girl," I said.

She set her jaw. "He will not die." She paused. "Will you fix his wing now?"

"Yes."

"I will help."

I shook my head. "You will build a cage in which to confine him, for if he tries to move his wing too soon, he will break it again, and then I will surely have to destroy him."

She handed the bird to me. "I will be back soon," she promised, racing off toward her *shamba*.

I took the falcon into my hut. He was too weak to struggle very much, and he allowed me to tie his beak shut. Then I began the slow task of splinting his broken wing and binding it against his body to keep it mo-

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tionless. He shrieked in pain as I manipulated the bones together, but otherwise he simply stared unblinking at me, and within ten minutes the job was finished.

Kamari returned an hour later, holding a small wooden cage in her hands.

"Is this large enough, Koriba?" she asked.

I held it up and examined it.

"It is almost too large," I replied. "He must not be able to move his wing until it has healed."

"He won't," she promised. "I will watch him all day long, every day."

"You will watch him all day long, every day?" I repeated, amused.

"Yes."

"Then who will clean my hut and my *boma*, and who will fill my gourd with water?"

"I will carry his cage with me when I come," she replied.

"The cage will be much heavier when the bird is in it," I pointed out.

"When I am a woman, I will carry far heavier loads on my back, for I shall have to till the fields and gather the firewood for my husband's *boma*," she said. "This will be good practice." She paused. "Why do you smile at me, Koriba?"

"I am not used to being lectured to by uncircumcised children," I replied with a smile.

"I was not lecturing," she answered with dignity. "I was *explaining*."

I held a hand up to shade my eyes from the afternoon sun.

"Are you not afraid of me, little Kamari?" I asked.

"Why should I be?"

"Because I am the *mundumugu*."

"That just means you are smarter than the others," she said with a shrug. She threw a stone at a chicken that was approaching her cage, and it raced away, squawking its annoyance. "Someday I shall be as smart as you are."

"Oh?"

She nodded confidently. "Already I can count higher than my father, and I can remember many things."

"What kind of things?" I asked, turning slightly as a hot breeze blew a swirl of dust about us.

"Do you remember the story of the honey bird that you told to the

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children of the village before the long rains?"

I nodded.

"I can repeat it," she said.

"You mean you can remember it."

She shook her head vigorously. "I can repeat every word that you said."

I sat down and crossed my legs. "Let me hear it," I said, staring off into the distance and idly watching a pair of young men tending their cattle.

She hunched her shoulders, so that she would appear as bent with age as I myself am, and then, in a voice that sounded like a youthful replica of my own, she began to speak, mimicking my gestures.

"There is a little brown honey bird," she began. "He is much like a sparrow, and as friendly. He will come to your *boma* and call to you; and as you approach him, he will fly up and lead you to a hive, and then wait while you gather grass and set fire to it and smoke out the bees. But you must *always*" — she emphasized the word, just as I had done — "leave some honey for him, for if you take it all, the next time he will lead you into the jaws of *fisi*, the hyena, or perhaps into the desert, where there is no water and you will die of thirst." Her story finished, she stood upright and smiled at me. "You see?" she said proudly.

"I see," I said, brushing away a large fly that had lit on my cheek.

"Did I do it right?" she asked.

"You did it right."

She stared at me thoughtfully. "Perhaps when you die, I will become the *mundumugu*."

"Do I seem that close to death?" I asked her.

"Well," she answered, "you are very old and bent and wrinkled, and you sleep too much. But I will be just as happy if you do not die right away."

"I shall try to make you just as happy," I said ironically. "Now take your falcon home."

I was about to instruct her concerning his needs, but she spoke first.

"He will not want to eat today. But starting tomorrow, I will give him large insects, and at least one lizard every day. And he must always have water."

"You are very observant, Kamari."

She smiled at me again, and then ran off toward her *boma*.

She was back at dawn the next morning, carrying the cage with her.

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She placed it in the shade, then filled a small container with water from one of my gourds and set it inside the cage.

"How is your bird this morning?" I asked, sitting close to my fire, for even though the planetary engineers of the Eutopian Council had given Kirinyaga a climate identical to Kenya's, the sun had not yet warmed the morning air.

Kamari frowned. "He has not eaten yet."

"He will, when he gets hungry enough," I said, pulling my blanket more tightly around my shoulders. "He is used to swooping down on his prey from the sky."

"He drinks his water, though," she noted.

"That is a good sign."

"Can you not cast a spell that will heal him at once?"

"The price would be too high," I said, for I had foreseen her question. "This way is better."

"How high?"

"*Too* high," I repeated, closing the subject. "Now, do you not have work to do?"

"Yes, Koriba."

She spent the next few minutes gathering kindling for my fire and filling my gourd from the river. Then she went into my hut to clean it and straighten my sleeping blankets. She emerged a moment later with a book in her hand.

"What is this, Koriba?" she asked.

"Who told you that you could touch your *mundumugu*'s possessions?" I asked sternly.

"How can I clean them without touching them?" she replied with no show of fear. "What is it?"

"It is a book."

"What is a book, Koriba?"

"It is not for you to know," I said. "Put it back."

"Shall I tell you what I think it is?" she asked.

"Tell me,'" I said, curious to hear her answer.

"Do you know how you draw signs on the ground when you cast the bones to bring the rains? I think that a book is a collection of signs."

"You are a very bright little girl, Kamari."

"I *told* you that I was," she said, annoyed that I had not accepted her

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statement as a self-evident truth. She looked at the book for a moment, then held it up. "What do the signs mean?"

"Different things," I said.

"*What* things?"

"It is not necessary for the Kikuyu to know."

"But *you* know."

"I am the *mundumugu*."

"Can anyone else on Kirinyaga read the signs?"

"Your own chief, Koinnage, and two other chiefs can read the signs," I answered, sorry now that she had charmed me into this conversation, for I could foresee its direction.

"But you are all old men," she said. "You should teach me, so when you all die, someone can still read the signs."

"These signs are not important," I said. "They were created by the Europeans. The Kikuyu had no need for books before the Europeans came to Kenya; we have no need for them on Kirinyaga, which is our own world. When Koinnage and the other chiefs die, everything will be as it was long ago."

"Are they evil signs, then?" she asked.

"No," I said. "They are not evil. They just have no meaning for the Kikuyu. They are white man's signs."

She handed the book to me. "Would you read me one of the signs?"

"Why?"

"I am curious to know what kind of signs the white men made."

I stared at her for a long minute, trying to make up my mind. Finally I nodded my assent.

"Just this once," I said. "Never again."

"Just this once," she agreed.

I thumbed through the book, which was a Swahili translation of English poetry, selected one at random, and read it to her:

Live with me, and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That hills and valleys, dales and fields,
And all the craggy mountains yields.
There will we sit upon the rocks,
And see the shepherds feed their flocks,

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By shallow rivers, by whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.
There will I make thee a bed of roses,
With a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroider'd all with leaves of myrtle.
A belt of straw and ivy buds,
With coral clasps and amber studs;
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Then live with me and be my love.

KAMARI FROWNED. "I do not understand."

"I told you that you would not," I said. "Now put the book away and finish cleaning my hut. You must still work in your father's *shamba*, along with your duties here."

She nodded and disappeared into my hut, only to burst forth excitedly a few minutes later.

"It is a *story!*" she exclaimed.

"What is?"

"The sign you read! I do not understand many of the words, but it is a story about a warrior who asks a maiden to marry him!" She paused. "*You* would tell it better, Koriba. The sign doesn't even mention *fisi*, the hyena, and *mamba*, the crocodile, who dwells by the river and would eat the warrior and his wife. Still, it is a story! I had thought it would be spell for *mundumugus*."

"You are very wise to know that it is a story," I said.

"Read another to me!" she said enthusiastically.

I shook my head. "Do you not remember our agreement? Just that once, and never again."

She lowered her head in thought, then looked up brightly. "Then teach *me* to read the signs."

"That is against the law of the Kikuyu," I said. "No woman is permitted to read."

"Why?"

"It is a woman's duty to till the fields and pound the grain and make the fires and weave the fabrics and bear her husband's children," I

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answered.

"But I am not a woman," she pointed out. "I am just a little girl."

"But you will become a woman," I said, "and a woman may not read."

"Teach me now, and I will forget how when I become a woman."

"Does the eagle forget how to fly, or the hyena to kill?"

"It is not fair."

"No," I said. "But it is just."

"I do not understand."

"Then I will explain it to you," I said. "Sit down, Kamari."

She sat down on the dirt opposite me and leaned forward intently.

"Many years ago," I began, "the Kikuyu lived in the shadow of Kirinyaga, the mountain upon which Ngai dwells."

"I know," she said. "Then the Europeans came and built their cities."

"You are interrupting," I said.

"I am sorry, Koriba," she answered. "But I already know this story."

"You do not know all of it," I replied. "Before the Europeans came, we lived in harmony with the land. We tended our cattle and plowed our fields, and we produced just enough children to replace those who died of old age and disease, and those who died in our wars against the Maasai and the Wakamba and the Nandi. Our lives were simple but fulfilling."

"And *then* the Europeans came!" she said.

"Then the Europeans came," I agreed, "and they brought new ways with them."

"Evil ways."

I shook my head. "They were not evil ways for the Europeans," I replied. "I know, for I have studied in European schools. But they were not good ways for the Kikuyu and the Maasai and the Wakamba and the Embu and the Kisi and all the other tribes. We saw the clothes they wore and the buildings they erected and the machines they used, and we tried to become like Europeans. But we are not Europeans, and their ways are not our ways, and they do not work for us. Our cities became overcrowded and polluted, and our land grew barren, and our animals died, and our water became poisoned, and finally, when the Eutopian Council allowed us to move to the world of Kirinyaga, we left Kenya behind and came here to live according to the old ways, the ways that are good for the Kikuyu." I paused. "Long ago the Kikuyu had no written language, and did not know how to read, and since we are trying to create a Kikuyu world here on

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Kirinyaga, it is only fitting that our people do not learn to read or write."

"But what is good about not knowing how to read?" she asked. "Just because we didn't do it before the Europeans came doesn't make it bad."

"Reading will make you aware of other ways of thinking and living, and then you will be discontented with your life on Kirinyaga."

"But *you* read, and you are not discontented."

"I am the *mundumugu*," I said. "I am wise enough to know that what I read are lies."

"But lies are not always bad," she persisted. "You tell them all the time."

"The *mundumugu* does not lie to his people," I replied sternly.

"You call them stories, like the story of the lion and the hare, or the tale of how the rainbow came to be, but they are lies."

"They are parables," I said.

"What is a parable?"

"A type of story."

"Is it a true story?"

"In a way."

"If it is true in a way, then it is also a lie in a way, is it not?" she replied, and then continued before I could answer her. "And if I can listen to a lie, why can I not read one?"

"I have already explained it to you."

"It is not fair," she repeated.

"No," I agreed. "But it is true, and, in the long run, it is for the good of the Kikuyu."

"I still don't understand why it is good," she complained.

"Because we are all that remain. Once before, the Kikuyu tried to become something that they were not, and we became not city-dwelling Kikuyu, or bad Kikuyu, or unhappy Kikuyu, but an entirely new tribe called Kenyans. Those of us who came to Kirinyaga came here to preserve the old ways — and if women start reading, some of them will become discontented, and they will leave, and then one day there will be no Kikuyu left."

"But I don't want to leave Kirinyaga!" she protested. "I want to become circumsized, and bear many children for my husband, and till the fields of his *shamba*, and someday be cared for by my grandchildren."

"That is the way you are supposed to feel."

"But I also want to read about other worlds and other times."

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I shook my head. "No."

"But—"

"I will hear no more of this today," I said. "The sun grows high in the sky, and you have not yet finished your tasks here, and you must still work in your father's *shamba* and come back again this afternoon."

She arose without another word and went about her duties. When she finished, she picked up the cage and began walking back to her *boma*.

I watched her walk away, then returned to my hut and activated my computer to discuss a minor orbital adjustment with Maintenance, for it had been hot and dry for almost a month. They gave their consent, and, a few moments later, I walked down the long, winding path into the center of the village. Lowering myself gently to the ground, I spread my pouchful of bones and charms out before me and invoked Ngai to cool Kirinyaga with a mild rain, which Maintenance had agreed to supply later in the afternoon.

Then the children gathered about me, as they always did when I came down from my *boma* on the hill and entered the village.

"*Jambo*, Koriba!" they cried.

"*Jambo*, my brave young warriors," I replied, still seated on the ground.

"Why have you come to the village this morning, Koriba?" asked Ndemi, the boldest of the young boys.

"I have come here to ask Ngai to water our fields with His tears of compassion," I said, "for we have had no rain this month, and the crops are thirsty."

"Now that you have finished speaking to Ngai, will you tell us a story?" asked Ndemi.

I looked up at the sun, estimating the time of day.

"I have time for just one," I replied. "Then I must walk through the fields and place new charms on the scarecrows, that they may continue to protect your crops."

"What story will you tell us, Koriba?" asked another of the boys.

I looked around, and saw that Kamari was standing among the girls.

"I think I shall tell you the story of the Leopard and the Shrike," I said.

"I have not heard that one before," said Ndemi.

"Am I such an old man that I have no new stories to tell?" I demanded, and he dropped his gaze to the ground. I waited until I had everyone's attention, and then I began:

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"Once there was a very bright young shrike, and because he was very bright, he was always asking questions of his father.

"'Why do we eat insects?' he asked one day.

"'Because we are shrikes, and that is what shrikes do,' answered his father.

"'But we are also birds,' said the shrike. "And do not birds such as the eagle eat fish?'

"'Ngai did not mean for shrikes to eat fish,' said his father, 'and even if you were strong enough to catch and kill a fish, eating it would make you sick.'

"'Have you ever eaten a fish?' asked the young shrike.

"'No,' said his father.

"'Then how do you know?' said the young shrike, and that afternoon he flew over the river and found a tiny fish. He caught it and ate it, and he was sick for a whole week.

"'Have you learned your lesson now?' asked the shrike's father, when the young shrike was well again.

"'I have learned not to eat fish,' said the shrike. 'But I have another question.'

"'Why are shrikes the most cowardly of birds?' asked the shrike. 'Whenever the lion or the leopard appears, we flee to the highest branches of the trees and wait for them to go away.'

"'Lions and leopards would eat us if they could,' said the shrike's father. 'Therefore, we must flee from them.'

"'But they do not eat the ostrich, and the ostrich is a bird,' said the bright young shrike. 'If they attack the ostrich, he kills them with his kick.'

"'You are not an ostrich,' said his father, tired of listening to him.

"'But I am a bird, and the ostrich is a bird, and I will learn to kick as the ostrich kicks,' said the young shrike, and he spent the next week practicing kicking any insects and twigs that were in his way.

"Then one day he came across *chui*, the leopard, and as the leopard approached him, the bright young shrike did not fly to the highest branches of the tree, but bravely stood his ground.

"'You have great courage to face me thus,' said the leopard.

"'I am a very bright bird, and I am not afraid of you,' said the shrike. 'I have practiced kicking as the ostrich does, and if you come any closer, I

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will kick you and you will die.'

"'I am an old leopard, and cannot hunt any longer,' said the leopard. 'I am ready to die. Come kick me, and put me out of my misery.'

"The young shrike walked up to the leopard and kicked him full in the face. The leopard simply laughed, opened his mouth, and swallowed the bright young shrike.

"'What a silly bird,' laughed the leopard, 'to pretend to be something that he was not! If he had flown away like a shrike, I would have gone hungry today — but by trying to be what he was never meant to be, all he did was fill my stomach. I guess he was not a very bright bird, after all."

I stopped and stared straight at Kamari.

"Is that the end?" asked one of the other girls.

"That is the end," I said.

"Why did the shrike think he could be an ostrich?" asked one of the smaller boys.

"Perhaps Kamari can tell you," I said.

All the children turned to Kamari, who paused for a moment and then answered.

"There is a difference between wanting to be an ostrich, and wanting to know what an ostrich knows," she said, looking directly into my eyes. "It was not wrong for the shrike to want to know things. It was wrong for him to think he could become an ostrich."

There was a momentary silence while the children considered her answer.

"Is that true, Koriba?" asked Ndemi at last.

"No," I said, "for once the shrike knew what the ostrich knew, it forgot that it was a shrike. You must always remember who you are, and knowing too many things can make you forget."

"Will you tell us another story?" asked a young girl.

"Not this morning," I said, getting to my feet. "But when I come to the village tonight to drink *pombe* and watch the dancing, perhaps I will tell you the story about the bull elephant and the wise little Kikuyu boy. Now," I added, "do none of you have chores to do?"

The children dispersed, returning to their *shambas* and their cattle pastures, and I stopped by Juma's hut to give an ointment for his joints, which always bothered him just before it rained. I visited Koinnage and

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drank *pombe* with him, and then discussed the affairs of the village with the Council of Elders. Finally I returned to my own *boma*, for I always take a nap during the heat of the day, and the rain was not due for another few hours.

Kamari was there when I arrived. She had gathered more wood and water, and was filling the grain buckets for my goats as I entered my *boma*.

"How is your bird this afternoon?" I asked, looking at the pygmy falcon, whose cage had been carefully placed in the shade of my hut.

"He drinks, but he will not eat," she said in worried tones. "He spends all his time looking at the sky."

"There are things that are more important to him than eating," I said.

"I am finished now," she said. "May I go home, Koriba?"

I nodded, and she left as I was arranging my sleeping blanket inside my hut.

She came every morning and every afternoon for the next week. Then, on the eighth day, she announced with tears in her eyes that the pygmy falcon had died.

"I told you this would happen," I said gently. "Once a bird has ridden upon the winds, he cannot live on the ground."

"Do all birds die when they can no longer fly?" she asked.

"Most do," I said. "A few like the security of the cage, but most die of broken hearts, for, having touched the sky, they cannot bear to lose the gift of flight."

"Why do we make cages, then, if they do not make the birds feel better?"

"Because they make *us* feel better," I answered.

She paused, and then said: "I will keep my word and clean your hut and your *boma*, and fetch your water and kindling, even though the bird is dead."

I nodded. "That was our agreement," I said.

True to her word, she came back twice a day for the next three weeks. Then, at noon on the twenty-ninth day, after she had completed her morning chores and returned to her family's *shamba*, her father, Njoro, walked up the path to my *boma*.

"*Jambo*, Koriba," he greeted me, a worried expression on his face.

"*Jambo*, Njoro," I said without getting to my feet. "Why have you come

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to my *boma!*"

"I am a poor man, Koriba," he said, squatting down next to me. "I have only one wife, and she has produced no sons and only two daughters. I do not own as large a *shamba* as most men in the village, and the hyenas killed three of my cows this past year."

I could not understand his point, so I merely stared at him, waiting for him to continue.

"As poor as I am," he went on, "I took comfort in the thought that at least I would have the bride-prices from my two daughters in my old age." He paused. "I have been a good man, Koriba. Surely I deserve that much."

"I have not said otherwise," I replied.

"Then why are you training Kamari to be a *mundumugu!*" he demanded. "It is well known that the *mundumugu* never marries."

"Has Kamari told you that she is to become a *mundumugu!*" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. She does not speak to her mother or myself at all since she has been coming here to clean your *boma.*"

"Then you are mistaken," I said. "No woman may be a *mundumugu.* What made you think that I am training her?"

He dug into the folds of his *kikoi* and withdrew a piece of cured wildebeest hide. Scrawled on it in charcoal was the following inscription:

I AM KAMARI
I AM TWELVE YEARS OLD
I AM A GIRL

"This is writing," he said accusingly. "Women cannot write. Only the *mundumugu* and great chiefs like Koinnage can write."

"Leave this with me, Njoro," I said, taking the hide, "and send Kamari to my *boma.*"

"I need her to work on my *shamba* until this afternoon."

"Now," I said.

He sighed and nodded. "I will send her, Koriba." He paused. "You are certain that she is not to be a *mundumugu!*"

"You have my word," I said, spitting on my hands to show my sincerity.

He seemed relieved, and went off to his *boma.* Kamari came up the path a few minutes later.

"*Jambo,* Koriba," she said.

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"*Jambo*, Kamari," I replied. "I am very displeased with you."

"Did I not gather enough kindling this morning?" she asked.

"You gathered enough kindling."

"Were the gourds not filled with water?"

"The gourds were filled."

"Then what did I do wrong?" she asked, absently pushing one of my goats aside as it approached her.

"You broke your promise to me."

"That is not true," she said. "I have come every morning and every afternoon, even though the bird is dead."

"You promised not to look at another book," I said.

"I have not looked at another book since the day you told me that I was forbidden to."

"Then explain *this*," I said, holding up the hide with her writing on it.

"There is nothing to explain," she said with a shrug. "I wrote it."

"And if you have not looked at books, how did you learn to write?" I demanded.

"From your magic box," she said. "You never told me not to look at *it*."

"My magic box?" I said, frowning.

"The box that hums with life and has many colors."

"You mean my computer?" I said, surprised.

"Your magic box," she repeated.

"And it taught you how to read and write?"

"*I* taught me — but only a little," she said unhappily. "I am like the shrike in your story — I am not as bright as I thought. Reading and writing is very difficult."

"I told you that you must not learn to read," I said, resisting the urge to comment on her remarkable accomplishment, for she had clearly broken the law.

Kamari shook her head.

"You told me I must not look at your books," she replied stubbornly.

"I told you that women must not read," I said. "You have disobeyed me. For this, you must be punished." I paused. "You will continue your chores here for three more months, and you must bring me two hares and two rodents, which you must catch yourself. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"Now come into my hut with me, that you may understand one

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thing more."

She followed me into the hut.

"Computer," I said. "Activate."

"Activated," said the computer's mechanical voice.

"Computer, scan the hut and tell me who is here with me."

The lens of the computer's sensors glowed briefly.

"The girl, Kamari wa Njoro, is here with you," replied the computer.

"Will you recognize her if you see her again?"

"Yes."

"This is a Priority Order," I said. "Never again may you converse with Kamari wa Njoro verbally or in any known language."

"Understood and logged," said the computer.

"Deactivate." I turned to Kamari. "Do you understand what I have done, Kamari?"

"Yes," she said, "and it is not fair. I did not disobey you."

"It is the law that women may not read," I said, "and you have broken it. You will not break it again. Now go back to your *shamba*."

She left, head held high, youthful back stiff with defiance, and I went about my duties, instructing the young boys on the decoration of their bodies for their forthcoming circumcision ceremony, casting a counter-spell for old Siboki (for he had found hyena dung within his *shamba*, which is one of the surest signs of a *thahu*, or curse), instructing Maintenance to make another minor orbital adjustment that would bring cooler weather to the western plains.

By the time I returned to my hut for my afternoon nap, Kamari had come and gone again, and everything was in order.

FOR THE next two months, life in the village went its placid way. The crops were harvested, old Koinnage took another wife and we had a two-day festival with much dancing and *pombe*-drinking to celebrate the event, the short rains arrived on schedule, and three children were born to the village. Even the Eutopian Council, which had complained about our custom of leaving the old and the infirm out for the hyenas, left us completely alone. We found the lair of a family of hyenas and killed three whelps, then slew the mother when she returned. At each full moon, I slaughtered a cow — not merely a goat, but a large, fat cow — to thank Ngai for His generosity, for truly He had graced

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Kirinyaga with abundance.

During this period I rarely saw Kamari. She came in the mornings when I was in the village, casting bones to bring forth the weather, and she came in the afternoons when I was giving charms to the sick and conversing with the Elders — but I always knew she had been there, for my hut and my *boma* were immaculate, and I never lacked for water or kindling.

Then, on the afternoon after the second full moon, I returned to my *boma* after advising Koinnage about how he might best settle an argument over a disputed plot of land, and as I entered my hut, I noticed that the computer screen was alive and glowing, covered with strange symbols. When I had taken my degrees in England and America, I had learned English and French and Spanish, and of course I knew Kikuyu and Swahili, but these symbols represented no known language, nor, although they used numerals as well as letters and punctuation marks, were they mathematical formulas.

"Computer, I distinctly remember deactivating you this morning," I said, frowning. "Why does your screen glow with life?"

"Kamari activated me."

"And she forgot to deactivate you when she left?"

"That is correct."

"I thought as much," I said grimly. "Does she activate you every day?"

"Yes."

"Did I not give you a Priority Order never to communicate with her in any known language?" I said, puzzled.

"You did, Koriba."

"Can you then explain why you have disobeyed my directive?"

"I have not disobeyed your directive, Koriba," said the computer. "My programming makes me incapable of disobeying a Priority Order."

"Then what is this that I see upon your screen?"

"This is the Language of Kamari," replied the computer. "It is not among the 1,732 languages and dialects in my memory banks, and hence does not fall under the aegis of your directive."

"Did you create this language?"

"No, Koriba. Kamari created it."

"Did you assist her in any way?"

"No, Koriba, I did not."

"Is it a true language?" I asked. "Can you understand it?"

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"It is a true language. I can understand it."

"If she were to ask you a question in the Language of Kamari, could you reply to it?"

"Yes, if the question were simple enough. It is a very limited language."

"And if that reply required you to translate the answer from a known language to the Language of Kamari, would doing so be contrary to my directives?"

"No, Koriba, it would not."

"Have you in fact answered questions put to you by Kamari?"

"Yes, Koriba, I have," replied the computer.

"I see," I said. "Stand by for a new directive."

"Waiting. . . ."

I lowered my head in thought, contemplating the problem. That Kamari was brilliant and gifted was obvious: she had not only taught herself to read and write, but had actually created a coherent and logical language that the computer could understand and in which it could respond. I had given orders, and without directly disobeying them, she had managed to circumvent them. She had no malice within her, and wanted only to learn, which in itself was an admirable goal. All that was on the one hand.

On the other was the threat to the social order we had labored so diligently to establish on Kirinyaga. Men and women knew their responsibilities and accepted them happily. Ngai had given the Maasai the spear, and He had given the Wakamba the arrow, and He had given the Europeans the machine and printing press; but to the Kikuyu, He had given the digging-stick and the fertile land surrounding the sacred fig tree on the slopes of Kirinyaga.

Once before we had lived in harmony with the land, many long years ago. Then had come the printed word. It turned us first into slaves, and then into Christians, and then into soldiers and factory workers and mechanics and politicians, into everything that the Kikuyu were never meant to be. It had happened before; it could happen again.

We had come to the world of Kirinyaga to create a perfect Kikuyu society, a Kikuyu Utopia: could one gifted little girl carry within her the seeds of our destruction? I could not be sure, but it was a fact that gifted children grew up. They became Jesus, and Mohammed, and Jomo Kenyatta — but they also became Tippoo Tib, the greatest slaver of all, and Idi Amin, butcher of his own people. Or, more often, they became Friedrich

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Nietzsche and Karl Marx, brilliant men in their own right, but who influenced less brilliant, less capable men. Did I have the right to stand aside and hope that her influence upon our society would be benign, when all history suggested that the opposite was more likely to be true?

My decision was painful, but it was not a difficult one.

"Computer," I said at last, "I have a new Priority Order that supersedes my previous directive. You are no longer allowed to communicate with Kamari under any circumstances whatsoever. Should she activate you, you are to tell her that Koriba has forbidden you to have any contact with her, and you are then to deactivate immediately. Do you understand?"

"Understood and logged."

"Good," I said. "Now deactivate."

When I returned from the village the next morning, I found my water gourds empty, my blankets unfolded, my *boma* filled with the dung of goats.

The *mundumugu* is all-powerful among the Kikuyu, but he is not without compassion. I decided to forgive this childish display of temper, and so I did not visit Kamari's father, nor did I tell the other children to avoid her.

She did not come again in the afternoon. I know, because I waited beside my hut to explain my decision to her. Finally, when twilight came, I sent for the boy, Ndemi, to fill my gourds and clean my *boma*, and although such chores are woman's work, he did not dare disobey his *mundumugu*, although his every gesture displayed contempt for the tasks I had set for him.

When two more days had passed with no sign of Kamari, I summoned Njoro, her father.

"Kamari has broken her word to me," I said when he arrived. "If she does not come to clean my *boma* this afternoon, I will be forced to place a *thahu* upon her."

He looked puzzled. "She says that you have already placed a curse on her, Koriba. I was going to ask you if we should turn her out of our *boma*."

I shook my head. "No," I said. "Do not turn her out of your *boma*. I have placed no *thahu* on her yet — but she must come to work this afternoon."

"I do not know if she is strong enough," said Njoro. "She has had neither food nor water for three days, and she sits motionless in my wife's hut." He

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paused. "*Someone* has placed a *thahu* on her. If it's not you, perhaps you can cast a spell to remove it."

"She has gone three days without eating or drinking?" I repeated.

He nodded.

"I will see her," I said, getting to my feet and following him down the winding path to the village. When we reached Njoro's *boma*, he led me to his wife's hut, then called Kamari's worried mother out and stood aside as I entered. Kamari sat at the farthest point from the door, her back propped against a wall, her knees drawn up to her chin, her arms encircling her thin legs.

"*Jambo*, Kamari," I said.

She stared at me but said nothing.

"Your mother worries for you, and your father tells me that you no longer eat or drink."

She made no answer.

"Listen to my words, Kamari," I said slowly. "I made my decision for the good of Kirinyaga, and I will not recant it. As a Kikuyu woman, you must live the life that has been ordained for you." I paused. "However, neither the Kikuyu nor the Eutopian Council are without compassion for the individual. Any member of our society may leave if he wishes. According to the charter we signed when we claimed this world, you need only walk to that area known as Haven, and a Maintenance ship will pick you up and transport you to the location of your choice."

"All I know is Kirinyaga," she said. "How am I to chose a new home if I am forbidden to learn about other places?"

"I do not know," I admitted.

"I don't *want* to leave Kirinyaga!" she continued. "This is my home. These are my people. I am a Kikuyu girl, not a Maasai girl or a European girl. I will bear my husband's children and till his *shamba*; I will gather his wood and cook his meals and weave his garments; I will leave my parents' *shamba* and live with my husband's family. I will do all this this without complaint, Koriba, if you will just let me learn to read and write!"

"I cannot," I said sadly.

"But *why*?"

"Who is the wisest man you know, Kamari?" I asked.

"The *mundumugu* is always the wisest man in the village."

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"Then you must trust to my wisdom."

"But I feel like the pygmy falcon," she said, her misery reflected in her voice. "He spent his life dreaming of soaring high upon the winds. I dream of seeing words upon the computer screen."

"You are not like the falcon at all," I said. "He was prevented from being what he was meant to be. You are prevented from being what you are not meant to be."

"You are not an evil man, Koriba," she said solemnly. "But you are wrong."

"If that is so, then I shall have to live with it," I said.

"But you are asking *me* to live with it," she said, "and that is your crime."

"If you call me a criminal again," I said sternly, for no one may speak thus to the *mundumugu*, "I shall surely place a *thahu* on you."

"What more can you do?" she said bitterly.

"I can turn you into a hyena, an unclean eater of human flesh who prowls only in the darkness. I can fill your belly with thorns, so that your every movement will be agony. I can—"

"You are just a man," she said wearily, "and you have already done your worst."

"I will hear no more of this," I said. "I order you to eat and drink what your mother brings to you, and I expect to see you at my *boma* this afternoon."

I walked out of the hut and told Kamari's mother to bring her banana mash and water, then stopped by old Benima's *shamba*. Buffalo had stampeded through his fields, destroying his crops, and I sacrificed a goat to remove the *thahu* that had fallen upon his land.

When I finished, I stopped at Koinnage's *boma*, where he offered me some freshly brewed *pombe* and began complaining about Kibo, his newest wife, who kept taking sides with Shumi, his second wife, against Wambu, his senior wife.

"You can always divorce her and return her to her family's *shamba*," I suggested.

"She cost twenty cows and five goats!" he complained. "Will her family return them?"

"No, they will not."

"Then I will not send her back."

"As you wish," I said with a shrug.

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"Besides, she is very strong and very lovely," he continued. "I just wish she would stop fighting with Wambu."

"What do they fight about?" I asked.

"They fight about who will fetch the water, and who will mend my garments, and who will repair the thatch on my hut." He paused. "They even argue about whose hut I should visit at night, as if I had no choice in the matter."

"Do they ever fight about ideas?" I asked.

"Ideas?" he repeated blankly.

"Such as you might find in books."

He laughed. "They are *women*, Koriba. What need have they for ideas?" He paused. "In fact, what need have any of us for them?"

"I do not know," I said. "I was merely curious."

"You look disturbed," he noted.

"It must be the *pombe*," I said. "I am an old man, and perhaps it is too strong."

"That is because Kibo will not listen when Wambu tells her how to brew it. I really should send her away" — he looked at Kibo as she carried a load of wood on her strong, young back — "but she is so young and so lovely." Suddenly his gaze went beyond his newest wife to the village. "Ah!" he said. "I see that old Siboki has finally died."

"How do you know?" I asked.

He pointed to a thin column of smoke. "They are burning his hut."

I stared off in the direction he indicated. "That is not Siboki's hut," I said. "His *boma* is more to the west."

"Who else is old and infirm and due to die?" asked Koinnage.

And suddenly I knew, as surely as I knew that Ngai sits on His throne atop the holy mountain, that Kamari was dead.

I walked to Njoro's *shamba* as quickly as I could. When I arrived, Kamari's mother and sister and grandmother were already wailing the death chant, tears streaming down their faces.

"What happened?" I demanded, walking up to Njoro.

"Why do you ask, when it was you who destroyed her?" he replied bitterly.

"I did not destroy her," I said.

"Did you not threaten to place a *thahu* on her just this morning?" he persisted. "You did so, and now she is dead, and I have but one daughter to

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bring the bride-price, and I have had to burn Kamari's hut."

"Stop worrying about bride-prices and huts and tell me what happened, or you shall learn what it means to be cursed by a *mundumugu!*" I snapped.

"She hanged herself in her hut with a length of buffalo hide."

Five women from the neighboring *shamba* arrived and took up the death chant.

"She hanged herself in her hut?" I repeated.

He nodded. "She could at least have hanged herself from a tree, so that her hut would not be unclean and I would not have to burn it."

"Be quiet!" I said, trying to collect my thoughts.

"She was not a bad daughter," he continued. "Why did you curse her, Koriba?"

"I did not place a *thahu* upon her," I said, wondering if I spoke the truth. "I wished only to save her."

"Who has stronger medicine than you?" he asked fearfully.

"She broke the law of Ngai," I answered.

"And now Ngai has taken His vengeance!" moaned Njoro fearfully. "Which member of my family will He strike down next?"

"None of you," I said. "Only Kamari broke the law."

"I am a poor man," said Njoro cautiously, "even poorer now than before. How much must I pay you to ask Ngai to receive Kamari's spirit with compassion and forgiveness?"

"I will do that whether you pay me or not," I answered.

"You will not charge me?" he asked.

"I will not charge you."

"Thank you, Koriba!" he said fervently.

I stood and stared at the blazing hut, trying not to think of the smoldering body of the little girl inside it.

"Koriba?" said Njoro after a lengthy silence.

"What now?" I asked irritably.

"We do not know what to do with the buffalo hide, for it bore the mark of your *thahu*, and we were afraid to burn it. Now I know that the marks were made by Ngai and not you, and I am afraid even to touch it. Will you take it away?"

"What marks?" I said. "What are you talking about?"

He took me by the arm and led me around to the front of the burning hut. There, on the ground, some ten paces from the entrance, lay the strip

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of tanned hide with which Kamari had hanged herself, and scrawled upon it were more of the strange symbols I had seen on my computer screen three days earlier.

I reached down and picked up the hide, then turned to Njoro. "If indeed there is a curse on your shamba," I said, "I will remove it and take it upon myself, by taking Ngai's marks with me."

"Thank you, Koriba!" he said, obviously much relieved.

"I must leave to prepare my magic," I said abruptly, and began the long walk back to my *boma*. When I arrived, I took the strip of buffalo hide into my hut.

"Computer," I said. "Activate."

"Activated."

I held the strip up to its scanning lens.

"Do you recognize this language?" I asked.

The lens glowed briefly.

"Yes, Koriba. It is the Language of Kamari."

"What does it say?"

"It is a couplet:

I know why the caged birds die—
For, like them, I have touched the sky."

The entire village came to Njoro's *shamba* in the afternoon, and the women wailed the death chant all night and all of the next day, but before long Kamari was forgotten, for life goes on, and she was, after all, just a little Kikuyu girl.

Since that day, whenever I have found a bird with a broken wing, I have attempted to nurse it back to health. It always dies, and I always bury it next to the mound of earth that marks where Kamari's hut had been.

It is on those days, when I place the birds in the ground, that I find myself thinking of her again, and wishing that I were just a simple man, tending my cattle and worrying about my crops and thinking the thoughts of simple men, rather than a *mundumugu* who must live with the consequences of his wisdom.

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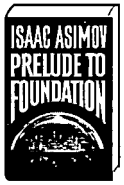

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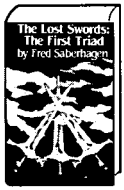

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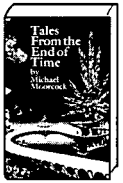

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